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BY

MISS DORA RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF "A STRANGE MARRIAGE," "THE BROKEN SEAL," "JEZEBEL'S
FRIEND," ETC., ETC.

Authorized Edition

NEW YORK

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150 WORTH STREET, CORNER MISSION PLACE

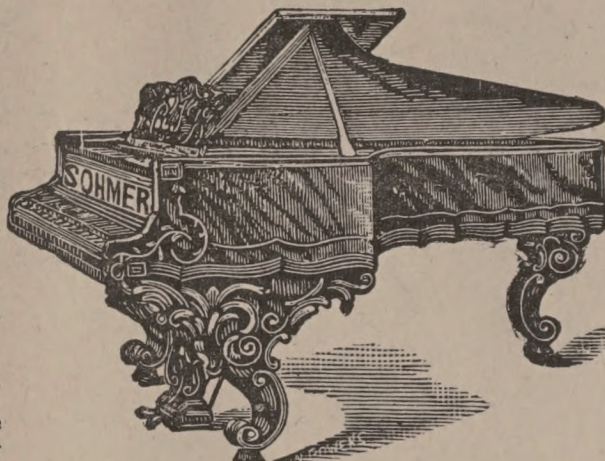
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Issued Weekly. Annual Subscription, \$15.00. December 9, 1890.

Entered at New York Post Office as second-class matter.

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OR

LADY GILMORE'S TEMPTATION

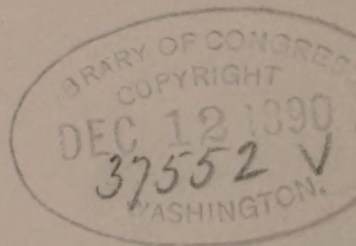
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A BITTER BIRTHRIGHT, OR, LADY GILMORE'S TEMPTATION.

CHAPTER I.

MOTHER'S HELP.

A DREARY day ; dreary within and without, as though the gray clouds wept over the little house, with the drawn blinds, where a widow and her children crouched together in the first dark hours of the knowledge of their bitter bereavement.

The blow had fallen so swiftly, so suddenly, that the mother of the small group of mourners felt utterly overwhelmed and struck down. She had risen on this dull November morning, and looked out on the roadway before her modest suburban home, and watched the dead leaves swirling in circles as the wind swept them hither and thither ; and while her eyes followed their airy flights her thoughts had wandered vaguely on. Before the leaves fell again Robert would be with her ; Robert, her husband in India, for his regiment was expected to return to England early in the following year.

Mrs. Loftus sighed thankfully ; what a comfort to have him near her once more, she was thinking ; to look again on his dear face. How surprised he would be to see Winny : Winny the two years old baby, whom she had brought home fourteen months ago, now grown to a lovely child of three. And Nancy—their handsome Nancy—how proud father would be of her.

Still thinking of her husband and children, and with a

(as the children called her) drew down the blinds with a sad heart, and the little group of mourners clung together in the semi-darkness, weeping and wailing for their dead, while the rain beat against the window-panes, and the wind sighed and moaned round the desolated home.

The next few days were very miserable ones. Mrs. Loftus wandered about for the first two nights, unable to bear the burden of her anguish if she were still, and the consequences of this was that she took a chill, and was seized with congestion of the lungs, and the bodily pain perhaps helped to benumb at the time her great and lasting sorrow. Her mother's illness at all events roused Nancy from her first deep grief. She had to look after everything now, for the doctor ordered that Mrs. Loftus was not to be disturbed, and Nancy had no other relation near to help her.

The poor girl tried to be very brave, but it was a heavy task that she was forced to undertake. Her father's death not only was a great and terrible blow to them all, but it meant also loss of position and income, for Colonel Loftus had been able to save very little.

Many kindly letters of sympathy came to the little house in the quiet suburb which Mrs. Loftus had taken for herself and her children to await her husband's return. These letters were from the officers of Colonel Loftus's regiment; from their wives; from the many friends and acquaintances he had made during his wanderings, were one and all couched in terms of the deepest and most affectionate regret for the genial, kindly man who was gone.

"Every soldier in the regiment feels he has lost a friend," wrote one; "his untimely death has spread a universal gloom over us," another had penned; "we feel most deeply for you all," most truthfully affirmed a third.

Nancy had to open these letters, read them, and answer them, while her mother lay weak and sometimes half-delirious upstairs. And little by little—first after a visit from her father's lawyer, which was intended for her mother, but Mrs. Loftus was too ill to see him—Nancy began to understand that they would be very poor; that there was not, indeed, sufficient left to support them even in ordinary comfort.

One of these letters of condolence mentioned their want of means plainly, though very kindly. This letter was

from Lady Blenkinsop, General Sir Charles Blenkinsop's wife, and both Lady Blenkinsop and Sir Charles were old, intimate friends of Colonel and Mrs. Loftus. It was addressed to Mrs. Loftus, but Nancy having by her mother's wish opened it, she began to realize in full their unfortunate position.

It commenced by expressing the true sorrow that the General and herself alike felt at the loss of "so kind and worthy a man as your dear husband;" and it went on in sympathizing terms to regret that Lady Blenkinsop feared and had heard that Colonel Loftus having thus been cut off in the midst of his days, would have been unable to leave a sufficient provision for his family.

"And now, my dear Mrs. Loftus," wrote this plain-spoken friend, "I do trust that if either the General or myself can do anything to assist you in your troubles that you will not hesitate to apply to us. I have been thinking about your eldest girl; she is old enough to do so, and naturally will be most anxious to help her widowed mother, and my position here would, I am quite sure, enable me to procure her a good situation in one of the families around. When you write tell me what you think of this scheme. You will have more than enough to do to rear and educate the two younger children, and then your boy at school! Nancy is a fine girl, and it is her duty now to endeavor to assist you, and I shall be glad to learn that she is willing to do so."

As Nancy read these words her pretty face flushed and her breath came short. They were a shock and a revelation to her, for though she knew they would be poor, the idea of taking a situation had never once presented itself to her mind.

"Lady Blenkinsop has no right to make such a suggestion," she thought, lifting her head proudly; but a minute later it fell. About the children she was thinking; "and Bob at school—he must stay at school, and it costs so much."

She could not consult her mother, for Mrs. Loftus' illness had weakened her so terribly that Nancy had strict orders from the doctor not to say anything to her that could possibly disturb her. So after much thought Nancy at last decided to go down to the lawyer's office who had called upon them after the news had arrived of Colonel Loftus' death, and who had more than hinted that he feared

his late client's affairs had not been left in a very prosperous condition.

Nancy started on her expedition in an omnibus, by way of spending as little as she could, but got nervous and lost her way in the crowded city, and finally had to take refuge in a cab. When she reached Mr. Bayford's offices she tremblingly sent up her card, and a few moments later was ushered into a well-furnished room, where a smiling, good-looking, middle-aged man rose to receive the frightened girl.

This was Mr. Bayford himself, and as he had been a personal friend of Colonel Loftus, he now felt sincere pity for his family. His manner to Nancy was therefore very kind, but he had too much good sense to disguise the sad truth from her.

"It's a most unfortunate case, Miss Loftus, I am sorry to tell you," he said, in answer to Nancy's timid inquiries concerning their means; "here is your poor father's last letter to me," he went on, opening a drawer in the table before him and taking out a thin envelope; "only written a few days before his sudden death, in which he stated he wished to insure his life for three thousand pounds for the benefit of his wife and family. If he had but done this;" and the lawyer paused significantly.

"And he had not done so?" asked Nancy in a low tone.

"Unhappily he had not—he little thought, poor fellow!"

Tears rushed into Nancy's eyes and rolled down her cheeks at this allusion to her poor father's fatal accident. She turned away her head to hide her emotion from Mr. Bayford, and he affected not to observe it, and in a few kindly and considerate words endeavored to explain to the agitated girl what he believed in future would be the amount of their income.

It was very, very little. Mrs. Loftus had only brought a few hundreds to her husband, for her father—a soldier also—could afford no larger portion to his pretty daughter when she wedded the husband of her choice. This modest sum, however, remained intact, and Colonel Loftus had contrived to save about one thousand pounds. Altogether there was nearly fifteen hundred pounds available for the poor widow and her fatherless children. This, with her pension, would be all Mrs. Loftus had to

live on, Mr. Bayford stated, and when he named the yearly amount that she could expect to receive, Nancy knew that it would be absolutely necessary for her to endeavor to do something to assist her mother.

"It is a very small sum of course," said Mr. Bayford kindly," but still, in a cottage in the country, and with economy, I daresay your mother will be able to make it do. And perhaps by-and-by you will be able to help her? Have you any particular talent or accomplishment?"

Nancy sorrowfully shook her head.

"I am afraid not," she answered; and then after a moment's silence, and with a sudden blush she mentioned Lady Blenkinsop's suggestion, that she should try to find some situation.

"A very sensible and praiseworthy idea," promptly replied Mr. Bayford; "and it is very well indeed that you have such an influential friend as Lady Blenkinsop ready to help you. If you could procure a situation, as a governess, shall we say, in some good family, with sixty or seventy pounds a year salary, you could spare half of it to assist your mother to bring up her younger children?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" said Nancy; but there was an odd, choking sensation in her throat which prevented her from speaking many words. It was all so new and strange to her, the thought of going out into the world amongst strangers, and to listen to its being thus discussed so calmly and indifferently naturally affected her. She had been her father's pride and darling, and had been nearly eighteen when her mother, the younger children and herself, had left India, fourteen months ago. Her father then commanded his regiment, and Nancy had been an admired, flattered young girl, holding a good position in society, for Colonel Loftus was a very popular man, and Nancy certainly had run a risk of being spoilt by the amount of attention she constantly received.

She had had her little romance, too, we may be sure, and while Mr. Bayford was talking of her future salary as a governess, her thoughts had wandered away to early morning rides, to whispered ball-room protestations; to a handsome face that Nancy remembered so well. But these romantic reflections were speedily interrupted.

"I shall be pleased," continued Mr. Bayford, rising and holding out his hand, "to hear you have obtained

a good situation ; and if at any time I can be of use to your mother or yourself, please let me know."

Nancy now saw that she was expected to go, and she went ; went back sadly and slowly to the little house that such a brief time ago had been made lively with girlish voices and laughter, but which was now as dull and gloomy as the leaden November skies above it. Mrs. Loftus, ill, weak and depressed, was confined to bed ; Milly, the second girl, who was always delicate and sensitive, had visibly drooped and pined in the sorrowful atmosphere by which she had lately been surrounded, and even the baby looked ill.

There was no one therefore to receive poor Nancy with a sympathetic smile of welcome when she returned home after her harassing visit to the City, weary and heart-sore. She went straight upstairs to her own little bedroom, and sat down there, and thought over all that Mr. Bayford had told her very sadly.

Then, after a while, she rose, bathed her eyes and a resolute look came over her pretty face.

"I must do what I can," she thought ; "there is no one else to do it. I must try to be mother's help."

CHAPTER II.

LADY BLENKENSOP.

THE same day Nancy wrote to her mother's friend, Lady Blenkinsop, and told her truthfully how little there was left for them to live on, and also how ill and broken down poor Mrs. Loftus was. And she added with flushed cheeks and trembling hands :—

"As soon as dear mother is well enough for me to leave her, I shall be very grateful to you if you will help me to obtain some situation that would enable me to assist mother," and so on.

The lady to whom this letter was addressed received it on the following morning at breakfast, and read it with her double gold-glasses fixed on her high and well-shaped nose.

She was a good-looking woman this, of some fifty-

five years, with clear, shrewd, searching eyes, a fresh complexion, and iron-gray hair. Opposite to her sat General Blenkinsop, a little man, white-haired and shrewd-looking also. He was reading a newspaper, but laid it down when his wife addressed him.

"This is from Nancy Loftus," said Lady Blenkinsop, in a loud but not unpleasant voice. She had a very decided manner, and spoke like a woman who quickly made up her mind.

"Ah?" answered the general inquiringly, looking at his wife through his spectacles. "And how are they getting on poor things?"

"Very badly. Just as I thought. Mrs. Loftus is ill, and one cannot wonder at it, and they are left wretchedly poor."

"I was afraid of that. Poor Loftus, it was a sad business."

"Nancy says here that her father had written to his lawyer about insuring his life for three thousand pounds only a few days before he was killed. Was there ever anything so unfortunate? But no man should ever put off for a day what is a positive duty if he has a wife."

The General gave a sort of assenting groan; *his* life was insured for five thousand pounds, and had been done so at the repeated requests and representations of his wife, therefore he was very well acquainted with her opinions on the subject.

"Nancy seems inclined to behave well and sensibly," continued Lady Blenkinsop. "She says she will be glad to take a situation as soon as she can leave her mother; and the sooner she does this the better. They will all have to put their hands to the wheel now, and poor Mrs. Loftus must exert herself for the sake of the younger children, as Nancy is the only one old enough to work."

"It's hard on poor Nancy; and such a pretty girl, too."

"But her good looks won't bring them bread. She's a well-educated young woman, and under their unfortunate circumstances she must turn her education to account, and spare some of her salary to help her mother. I shall see about getting her a situation at once."

"Wasn't Godfrey Erne rather sweet on her in India?"

"Godfrey Erne is in no position to be sweet, as you call it, on anyone: certainly not on a penniless girl," answered Lady Blenkinsop sharply; for Godfrey Erne

was her nephew, and she did not like to hear his name coupled with Nancy's.

"Well I'm sorry for the poor little lassie," said the General, as he once more raised his newspaper, for he was a kind man, and remembered the pretty girl so well, who had been the belle of many an Indian ball-room.

Lady Blenkinsop was a kind woman, too, but her kindness was of that active and somewhat aggravating nature which displays itself in the management of other people's affairs. The moment breakfast was over, therefore, she retired to a little sitting-room of her own, and at once drew out her visiting list and began seriously to consider, as she conned the names, which family would be most likely to require a governess suited to the age and capabilities of Nancy Loftus.

"The children must be young," mentally decided her ladyship in her energetic way; "Nancy is not old enough to manage big girls—Lady Gilmore's twins are seven or eight, I believe—I wonder if she would do for them."

And the idea of Lady Gilmore's twins found favor in Lady Blenkinsop's mind.

"She is very rich, and can afford to give Nancy a good salary," went on her reflections. "It would be a splendid thing for the girl if I can manage it. Well, I will try."

And Lady Blenkinsop did try. She drove the same day twelve miles in a cold, bleak mist to Wrothsley Castle, which was one of the show places of the county, and one of the many residences of the widowed Lady Gil-

Lady Blenkinsop knew this lady, and had visited her occasionally since the General had held his present command in the neighborhood, and she knew, too, that Lady Gilmore was considered a somewhat eccentric and odd-tempered woman.

Her marriage was said also to have been an unhappy one. The late Lord, a gay and handsome man, had married in his youth the daughter of a proud, poor northern Catholic family, who had brought him neither money nor beauty, and yet who esteemed her blue blood to be far beyond the new title and the great wealth of Lord Gilmore.

She despised, in fact, the origin of that great wealth, and never quite forgot that her husband's father had been a brewer, whose riches had grown and grown year by year, until a vast fortune was accumulated. He had been created a baronet first, and then, when he was quite an

old man, a peer, and scarcely lived a year to bear his new honors.

Then his young, good-looking son came into possession of the great estates, the gorgeous mansions, the huge vats, the mighty drayhorses, and the coronet, that the old man had left behind. He soon got rid of the vats and the dray-horses, and the famous beer his father had brewed was not used in the new Lord Gilmore's household, nor was it a word ever to be heard on his lips. He married into the oldest and proudest family he was acquainted with, for Miss Dorothy Vaux could not find in her heart to refuse the handsome wooer, though she scorned his new name. She loved him, was jealous of him, and sometimes reminded him with her sharp tongue that "her people" came of long descent, and that trade had never once stained their escutcheon. And these taunts did not tend to increase the young Lord's affection for his wife, and he sometimes swore at his highly-born Dorothy, and used very strong language indeed when the shadow of one of the black-robed priests of her Church was to be seen crossing his threshold.

But Lady Gilmore clung to her old faith, and there was a bitter quarrel between the husband and wife when an heir was born, in what tenets he should be reared. Lord Gilmore, however, got his own way, and the boy was christened by the Vicar of the parish; but the mother shed many secret tears over the cradle, and prayed silently words she dare not speak aloud.

The child was sickly and ailing from its birth, and died shortly after a second son was born, and again the mother struggled for what she deemed the new babe's salvation. But Lord Gilmore was firm; no child of his should be brought up a Roman Catholic, he told her, and Lady Gilmore was compelled to submit to this dictate. Again the Vicar of the parish was summoned, and Lord Gilmore named his second son Hugh, and wished many a time, both openly and in private, that this stalwart boy had been born the heir.

He was unjust and mean enough even to taunt his wife with her first-born's bodily delicacy, and when the child died made no pretence of regret. He indeed grew a little more domestic in his habits than formerly, and was never weary of playing with and admiring the little Hugh, whom he justly considered had inherited his own good looks, and straight and well-formed limbs.

And as this boy was born, so he grew up; a beautiful child, a handsome lad, he was the pride and darling of both his parents, and no other child that was born to them was ever regarded as he was. He remained the only son, though Lady Gilmore had four daughters, two of whom died in infancy; but when young Hugh was about seventeen the last of Lady Gilmore's children—the twin girls that Lady Blenkinsop was now so anxious to provide a governess for—were born, and three years later their father died, and thus, at twenty, Hugh Gifford, the heir, became Lord Gilmore.

It was a trying position for so young a man, and from that day his mother had watched over him with absolutely feverish anxiety and unrest. She had an excitable temperament, with strong, ardent feelings, and the jealous yearning love she had once given to her husband was now all centred on this handsome and beloved son. She sent him to travel with a private tutor when he was twenty-one, but some rumors having reached her ears, she started after him at an hour's notice, and remained with him the whole time he was abroad. He made her life half-miserable in fact, just as the late Lord Gilmore had done, but he was also the sole interest and hope of it. Her little girls in the nursery were almost nothing to her, and her thoughts by day and dreams by night were all filled with one image.

There was none like him, she often proudly thought; and many fair women whom Lady Gilmore did not choose to know, and many fair girls who courted her for his sake, were ready to agree with her, and declare that there were few, if any, so handsome, so winning, as the young, rich, third Lord Gilmore.

He was now twenty-four years of age, and the life he led was said to be far from a creditable one. But this did not prevent him being popular and sought after; his enormous wealth and personal advantages overweighed all the rest, and "he had but to choose," his mother said, when speaking of his marriage; an event which she feared, dreaded, and sometimes hoped for.

Lady Blenkinsop was thinking of this mother and son as she drove along the misty roadways towards Wrothslay. She was not personally acquainted with the young Lord, who only paid occasional, and sometimes very brief, visits to his mother, though, to do him justice, he was fond of her, and unwilling to wound her, un-

less his own pleasures and conveniences interfered with his filial affection.

“Well, it is a fine place, thought Lady Blenkinsop, as they entered the vast park, driving through the open lodge gate, at which stood the rosy-cheeked, stout lodge-keeper’s wife, surrounded by four rosy-cheeked children, who all seemed in some strange state of excitement or other.

“Absurd, having those children out in a mist like this,” mentally reflected Lady Blenkinsop as she passed this family group, for she never could resist managing her neighbor’s affairs, and absolutely thought of stopping the carriage to give the woman this advice. She did not do this, however, but proceeded across the park by the wide carriage road, the state of the atmosphere almost hiding from her view the broad grass lands and stately groups of leafless trees on either side of it.

The Castle was also invisible through the murky air; that vast pile of buildings which the first Lord Gilmore, then Sir Thomas Gifford, had raised with such pomp and pride. Nothing that wealth could purchase had not been spent on it, and the second Lord had been proud of his father’s pictures if not of his beer. All the great masters were represented at Wrothsley, and Sir Thomas used to boast that for the seven paintings the state dining-room contained he had spent over twenty-five thousand pounds.

“It is strange how unequally money is divided,” reflected Lady Blenkinsop, thinking of these things, as she proceeded on her way, and of the poor, almost penniless, well-born girl, whose bread she was now going to beg for from the heirs of the rich brewer.

Almost as this thought went through her active mind, a groom, splendidly mounted, and dressed in the Gilmore livery, galloped past the carriage in hot haste; the sudden appearance of the man and his steed through the mist, somewhat startled Lady Blenkinsop’s horses. The groom was riding from the Castle, which was still distant about half-a-mile, so extensive was the park; and as Lady Blenkinsop put her head out of the window and looked after the man, wondering what made him ride at such dangerous speed, she perceived a group of figures also approaching the carriage, and a moment later they had hurried past it, and among this group Lady Blenkinsop recognized a face, a figure, that she knew.

"Surely that was Lady Gilmore," she muttered to herself; "whatever can have happened."

Lady Gilmore's appearance was indeed sufficiently startling. Her dark hair was uncovered, and her dark eyes, were fixed before her with an expression of such anguish and mental fear written on them, that no wonder Lady Blenkinsop was sure that something dreadful must have occurred. She stopped the carriage; she descended on the roadway, and looked eagerly after Lady Gilmore's flying footsteps. Two women were with her, and one or two men-servants; and, as Lady Blenkinsop hesitated a moment what to do, another woman and a man also came running towards her from the direction of the Castle, and Lady Blenkinsop at once addressed the foremost of these.

"What is the matter?" she asked of an excited young woman-servant. "Surely that was Lady Gilmore who passed just now?"

"Yes, my Lady," answered the panting, breathless girl: "that was her poor ladyship, and she's in a fearful state."

"What has happened?" again inquired Lady Blenkinsop sharply.

"The young Lord has been shot, my Lady, and they say he's lying dead and murdered in the wood down there" answered the maid, and she pointed down the road.

"One of the keepers brought the news, and my Lady ran out just as she was, and they've sent John the groom galloping for the doctor, but the keeper thinks it's no good."

"How dreadful!" cried Lady Blenkinsop, greatly shocked, and her clear, rosy complexion grew a little pale. She was thinking of the mother whose devoted love for the young Lord was well known, and her kind heart bled for her.

"I'll follow her," she said the next moment, in her quick way. "Get up beside the coachman, girl, and direct him to the wood where you say Lord Gilmore was found. Did the keeper leave him alone when he brought the news to Lady Gilmore?"

"No, my Lady, two keepers found him, and one of them stayed with him," replied the maid as she prepared to obey Lady Blenkinsop's command, and was assisted up by the coachman to the box after he had turned his horses.

"Drive as fast as you can, Williams," directed Lady Blenkinsop, as she re-entered the carriage; and Williams, therefore, drove rapidly back the same road he had come until he pulled up in view of a small wood, or rather coppice, when he descended from his box and went to the carriage-window to speak to his lady.

"The young woman, my Lady, says yon's the wood where the young Lord was found, and there's no carriage road through it," he explained.

"In that case I shall get out," replied Lady Blenkinsop, "and the young woman must show me the way, and you wait here until I return."

Williams touched his hat, and went and gave directions to the "young woman;" and a moment or two later Lady Blenkinsop and the maid left the roadway, and crossed the damp grass until they reached the coppice, and entered the narrow pathway through its midst where every bough and branch of the leafless trees, and every leaf of the tall dark hollies, were hung with dew-drops from the mist.

They walked on almost in silence, for they heard a murmur of voices in advance of them, and presently down a glade—some seven or eight yards from the pathway—they saw figures moving, and guided by these soon came on a sight which might have moved the coldest heart.

They saw Lady Gilmore, bare-headed, white-faced, kneeling on the damp grass, and in her arms, pressed frantically against her bosom, was the still, ghastly face of the young man whose favored lot Lady Blenkinsop had so lately been thinking of, and whose life-blood was now streaming on his mother's breast.

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN'S NAME.

LADY BLENKENSOP was a woman of prompt and energetic action, and she did not waste any time in exclamations of pity or horror, as her eyes fell on the young lord's white face. She knelt down on the grass, raised one of the limp, colorless hands, that hung helplessly

by his side, and felt in vain for any pulsation at the wrist. But still something in his expression told her that the last breath of life had not passed away from his pallid lips.

"He has fainted from loss of blood, I think," she said in her quick way, addressing Lady Gilmore, whose face was rigid with the anguish and terror of her soul. "We must try to stop the bleeding until the doctor comes," she added, glancing round at the agitated group of servants present. "Have any of you a knife or a pair of scissors? We ought to cut the sleeve out of his coat: and we want brandy."

The butler, a respectable, middle-aged man, now stepped forward and produced a cut-glass bottle containing brandy.

"I caught up this, my lady, as I ran out of the house, as I thought it might be useful," he said.

"It is very well you had the good sense to bring it," replied Lady Blenkinsop, as she rose from the ground. She was wearing a handsome new plush cloak lined with fur, and as she put up her hand to unfasten the clasp for a moment she hesitated, for as a rule she was a saving woman, and very careful of her garments. But the grass was damp, and Lord Gilmore's hands cold and icy, and Lady Blenkinsop saw no help for it. So she took off her cloak and spread it on the ground.

"Now, Lady Gilmore let your people lift him on this," she said: "you should not hold up his head as you are doing, and I will try to get a little brandy between his lips, and first of all we must endeavor to stop the bleeding."

Lady Gilmore was too much overcome to offer any opposition to the elder woman's stronger will. She allowed them to take her son from her arms and lay him on Lady Blenkinsop's cloak, crawling to his side on her knees, while Lady Blenkinsop tried to pour a little brandy between his lips, and directed the butler to rub his hands and feet with the spirit. Then Lady Blenkinsop began energetically to cut the sleeve out of the young man's coat, through which the blood was still pouring fast. She soon accomplished this, and rolled back the soaked shirt below, and came to the wound close to the shoulder, to which she at once held a handkerchief with her firm hand.

"Go to the house for linen bandages, pillow cases—

anything will do," she said, looking up, and one or two of the women-servants at once ran to do her bidding, and in a short time Lady Blenkinsop had everything she required, and knew enough of the nature and binding of wounds to be of the greatest possible assistance to the injured man.

He sighed faintly twice, and his face lost its extreme pallor even before the doctor arrived. This doctor, a little, pompous, fat, red-faced man, was in a state of considerable excitement at being called in to attend on Lord Gilmore, as his services had only hitherto been required by the servants at Wrothsley. But he was the nearest medical man at hand, and the groom had ridden to his house in the village close by, and had happily found him at home, and Dr. Roberts had lost no time in hurrying to the young lord's side.

"He is beginning to revive, isn't he, doctor?" said Lady Blenkinsop, addressing him as he knelt down and took up one of Gilmore's chill hands and felt for his pulse.

"I hope so, my Lady," answered the little doctor nervously, and then he proceeded to examine the faintly blue-edged bullet wound.

"The shoulder is badly injured, I am afraid," he said.

"Is the bone broken?" asked Lady Blenkinsop inquiringly.

"Yes," answered the doctor, "but we can do nothing with that here: Lord Gilmore must be taken at once to the Castle."

He bound the wound up and then directed a mattress to be brought, and a gate to be hastily taken off its hinges, and when this was done, Lord Gilmore, still wrapped in Lady Blenkinsop's cloak, was lifted on it, and thus carried home, followed by his mother, whom Lady Blenkinsop had raised from the damp ground.

"Come, you must not give way; he is all right; he will pull through," she said, kindly and consolingly, to the white, or rather grayfaced woman, as she put her arm through Lady Gilmore's and took her hand; and Lady Gilmore's rose stiffly, still never once taking her eyes off her son.

Four men lifted the gate on which Lord Gilmore now lay, and bore him towards the Castle, the doctor walking by his side; and just as the two ladies were about to follow, Lady Blenkinsop felt someone touch her gown,

and, turning quickly round, saw the young maid-servant who had accompanied her to the spot, standing by her side.

"If you please, my Lady," she said, rather in a frightened tone, "I picked up this ribbon by the bush there, near where my Lord was lying, and I thought I had better give it to you."

"Quite right," answered Lady Blenkinsop quickly, and she took the bunch of cardinal-colored ribbons in her hand. It had evidently belonged to a woman's dress, a dainty bow, fresh and new-fangled, and without another word, and without attracting Lady Gilmore's attention to it, she slipped it into the pocket of her gown.

"It had caught on that bush there," said the maid, pointing to a trailing bramble; and Lady Blenkinsop nodded, and then silently put her arm through Lady Gilmore's, and together they walked out of the little wood behind the men who bore the young Lord.

Lady Gilmore's footsteps faltered, and sometimes nearly failed her, and it needed Lady Blenkinsop's strong arm to support her trembling frame. It was piteous to see the expression of her face, the fixed look of anguish in her dark eyes, as they followed the bearers of her son. All his life he had been the idol whom she had worshipped with an exceeding love, and to see him thus—struck down in his young prime—seemed almost more than her reason could endure. No wonder, then, that her strained gaze never moved; that her pallid lips spoke no word.

Lady Blenkinsop proposed that they should drive up to the castle in her carriage, which was waiting on the road-way through the park, but Lady Gilmore made a mute sign of dissent. So they silently walked on, and as they did so Lady Blenkinsop was speculating curiously how the cardinal-ribbon bow had found its way to the spot where Lord Gilmore lay wounded.

"Probably a woman's at the bottom of it," she reflected, and her head gave a little deprecating shake. But she said nothing to Lady Gilmore, and showed both good sense and kindness when at length they reached the Castle to the half-bewildered mother, who seemed, indeed, to have lost the power of thought.

"We had best telegraph for two of the first surgeons in town, had we not?" she suggested, and Lady Gilmore eagerly caught at the idea, though before it had never

occurred to her through the mists of her absorbing grief.

Lady Blenkinsop therefore at once wrote out two urgent telegrams, and sent the butler to the nearest Post-office with them, and having done this proceeded up the magnificent front staircase of the Castle in search of Lady Gilmore, who had closely followed her son. As she did this, and was passing down one of the long broad corridors, two little girls who were standing with frightened faces at the door of a room, ran up to her as she drew near.

"What is the matter, Lady Blenkinsop?" they both began almost as if in one voice. "What is the matter with Gilmore?"

"He has got hurt somehow, my dears," answered Lady Blenkinsop, kindly laying her hand on the shoulder of the girl nearest to her; "but I hope he will soon be better."

"Mother will not speak to us," she answered raising her pretty face with an injured air; "and no one will attend to us; it is very annoying."

"Where is your governess?" asked Lady Blenkinsop, her quick mind instantly travelling in the direction of Nancy Loftus, for these children were the twin-daughters of Lady Gilmore.

"She's gone," they both answered simultaneously, for they had a curious fashion of saying the same things at the same moment; "mother said she was a fool."

"Ah, indeed?" smiled Lady Blenkinsop.

"They had a row, you know," explained the young ladies in the following words: "They had a row, you know," said Miss Dossy; "Oh, yes, a row, you know," echoed Miss Flossy a moment later.

It was the same in all their conversations, and their features, hair and complexions were as like as their ideas. They were pretty children, and had inherited, as their brother had done, the good looks of the late Lord Gilmore, and not the dark eyes and sallow skin of their mother.

"And when did she go?" asked Lady Blenkinsop, who was interested in the departure of the governess.

"Mother packed her off yesterday," answered the twins; "packed her off at an hour's notice, and it was a good riddance."

It was funny to hear these children talk in their old-fashioned way. They, in truth, lived with grown-up

people, and Lady Gilmore was not a judicious mother. She gave way to her quick temper before them, and would scold and pet them in one breath. She found fault also with their governess in their presence, and laughed when they caught up Gilmore's phrases and words.

"Then you will want a new governess?" suggested Lady Blenkinsop.

"I suppose so, but it's a nuisance," said Dossy.

"Yes, a nuisance," echoed Flossy.

Lady Blenkinsop said nothing more about the governess, but she patted both the fair heads with her large, strong, white hand.

"Well, I shall go and see after your mother and your brother now, my dears," she proposed.

"And will you kindly come and tell us how Gilmore is?" replied the twins together. "We are anxious, you know, and everything seems at sixes and sevens."

"Yes, I shall come and tell you," said Lady Blenkinsop; "but you are too young to be with Gilmore while the doctor is there, as he is at present, and I suppose all the servants are busy."

"Yet we have a proper schoolroom maid who does nothing but attend on us," answered Dossy with some dignity.

"Nothing but attend on us," repeated Flossy.

"Gilmore's accident has put the household in confusion, I daresay; but I shall not forget my promise, and will come and tell you how he is going on. If I walk down here shall I come to his room?"

"It is in the left wing," replied both young ladies eagerly; "if you walk straight down here you will come to a staircase, and if you go up that you will come to Gilmore's suit of rooms; they are the best we have."

Lady Blenkinsop obeyed these directions, and went along the richly-carpeted corridor, which was hung on either side with valuable old armor, until she came to the staircase which led to the left wing. She ascended this, and meeting two maid-servants, was directed to the bedroom into which Lord Gilmore had been carried. She found him lying on the bed, looking faint and even ghastly white. The doctor kept his fingers anxiously on his pulse. He had relapsed into unconsciousness, and looked so death-like that a vague fear darted into Lady Blenkinsop's heart,

His mother was kneeling by one side of the bed, and never glanced round as Lady Blenkinsop entered the room. A silent moment or two passed—solemn moments, when the faint fluttering breath seemed almost stayed and the gray shadows of death grew very near—and then young manhood, strong and vigorous, asserted its power against the foe.

Once more Lord Gilmore sighed, and the extreme pallor again passed from his face, and the little doctor, who had grown quite pale with anxiety, breathed a sigh of relief.

“He’s coming round, my Lady,” he said, and his words proved true. But he was very weak and low, and the doctor made no further attempt to examine the wound, Lord Gilmore being in too prostrate a condition for him to do so.

It was not until nine o’clock in the evening, the two surgeons from town having by this time arrived at Wrothsley, that its real nature was ascertained. He had been shot in the upper part of the chest, close to the shoulder, and the bullet had lodged in and broken his shoulder-bone. It was a dangerous wound, though both the medical men declared not a fatal one, unless the young Lord sank through fever or weakness.

But it was so serious that Lady Blenkinsop gave up all idea of returning to her home until the crisis was past. She therefore sent her carriage back to Greystone Lodge, which her husband, General Sir Charles Blenkinsop, had taken for a season while he commanded in the neighborhood; and she entrusted her coachman with a letter to Sir Charles.

Let us read this characteristic epistle, and understand the somewhat grim smile with which the General did so.

“Dear Charles, —

“I drove this afternoon over here (to Wrothsley) for the purpose which I mentioned to you this morning at breakfast, namely, to try to get a situation for Nancy Loftus. I found everything in confusion, for the young Lord had just been discovered, it was feared, in a dying condition in one of the thickets of the Park. Lady Gilmore’s distress was so great that it seemed almost to deprive her of reason, and I trust I was able to be of some little help to her. He was bleeding to death from a bullet

wound when I reached him, and no one had had the sense to try to stop the hemorrhage. I succeeded in doing this, and we had him carried to the Castle, and I telegraphed for Sir James Thompson, and Mr. Lyhurst, whom I thought were the two most eminent men I could choose. They came down from town by a fast train, but it took them three hours, and they did not arrive until nine o'clock. By this time Gilmore had gained a little strength, and the doctors were able to give an opinion on his condition. He is dangerously, but we hope not fatally, wounded, and though from its nature the injury might have been self-inflicted, it is of course quite impossible to believe that it was. Gilmore has too many of this world's good gifts to wish to quit it. He is young, rich, and handsome, and was not at all likely—for he is self-indulgent and selfish, I am told—to cause himself suffering and pain. And also no revolver was found near the spot where he lay; but something very significant I think was, I will tell you more of this when I see you, for at present I think it is my duty to remain with poor Lady Gilmore, who really requires some sensible person to be with her. I hope also to be able to arrange about Nancy Loftus coming here as governess to the twin girls. They are old-fashioned little things, but pretty, and not in the least like their mother. Nancy will just suit them, I think, and Lady Gilmore can well afford to give her an excellent salary, which will be a great help to Mrs. Loftus.

“I shall be pleased to hear from you, or see you if you have time to come over. And I remain, your affectionate wife.

“MARGARET BLENKENSOP.”

Lady Blenkinsop having despatched this letter and presided at a late dinner for the two London doctors, and settled that one of them was to remain all night at Wrothslley and that Sir James Thompson was to return in the morning, as they then contemplated the extraction of the bullet, and having also telegraphed to town for two professional nurses, about eleven o'clock again found her way to the young Lord's room.

It was in semi-darkness, and the mother and the country doctor still were there, and Gilmore had sank into a restless slumber, and was murmuring uneasily in his dreams. Suddenly he half started and gave a cry.

"Alice! Alice!" he uttered in a plaintive voice of pain, and as the woman's name passed his lips, his mother's brow contracted, and Lady Blenkinsop silently watching her, saw her small hands clench and her pale face grow whiter still.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW GOVERNESS.

THE next few days were spent by Lady Gilmore in a miserable state of suspense between hope and fear. The bullet was extracted from Gilmore's shoulder safely, but a slight attack of fever set in, and even the doctors admitted to Lady Blenkinsop that his condition was extremely precarious. They did not tell the poor mother this, but with the deep, strange instinct of love she understood it, and watched night and day by his bed—her eyes, wistful and pathetic, fixed ever on his face.

He was delirious at times, and again and again addressed some imaginary person he called "Alice." He talked of other scenes, too; wild hours of debauchery and riot, and Lady Gilmore listening, bowed her head down upon the bed, and offered many a silent prayer. She brought her crucifix there also, and hung it by his bed, kneeling before it and asking for his life with an intensity of passion and faith which was unutterably touching.

Her two little girls, Dossy and Flossy, seemed at this time to be totally forgotten by her. She neither asked after them, nor saw them, but Lady Blenkinsop paid frequent visits to the schoolroom, and one day ventured to speak to Lady Gilmore about Nancy Loftus.

"Your little girls should have some lady to look after them, don't you think?" she suggested.

"I can think of nothing now but of him," answered Lady Gilmore, looking towards the open door, which led to Lord Gilmore's bedroom. The two ladies were in an ante-room where Lady Gilmore took her hasty meals, and lay occasionally down for an hour's disturbed rest, and she and Lady Blenkinsop were now drinking some tea.

"Of course, your anxiety is most natural, though I hope it will soon be over," said Lady Blenkinsop, kindly, "but these children really ought to have a governess.

I wish you would let me engage one for you. I know an extremely nice girl, well-born and well-educated, who, through the sad and sudden death of her father, is compelled to do something for her living."

"Do you know her? Is she a friend of yours?" asked Lady Gilmore, with interest.

"I know her well: have known her since she was a child, and her father, Colonel Loftus, was a great friend of my husband's, and was killed, poor man, quite lately, while out pig-sticking in India, and I am sorry to say has left his wife and family in very poor circumstances. But this girl, Nancy, who is a nice-looking, lady-like girl, is most anxious to do something to assist her mother; and as you happen to be without a governess I wish you would try her."

"She is a friend of yours, that is enough," said Lady Gilmore, with a sudden gush of impulsive gratitude, rising and clasping Lady Blenkinsop's hand. "Do you think I forget what you did for my boy? But for you—oh, I dare, I dare not talk of it—engage this young lady, of course, if you wish it, and give her whatever salary you think proper; I leave it entirely in your hands, and I thank you very much for thinking about the poor children."

"Would you think one hundred a year too much?" asked Lady Blenkinsop, who was prompt and practical, and knew that Lady Gilmore was very rich.

"Certainly not; more if you like—but hush—did Gilmore speak then?" And as she spoke Lady Gilmore stole quietly across the room, and went to the open bedroom door in an attitude of intent attention.

She stood listening thus for a few moments, and then, with a silent gesture of excuse to Lady Blenkinsop, entered her son's room, and Lady Blenkinsop, after one or two minutes' consideration, thought herself justified in writing to town to engage Nancy Loftus to be governess to the Honorable Misses Gilmore. She was very pleased to do this; pleased because she had arranged the matter, she believed, very cleverly, and because her kind heart rejoiced to be able thus to assist the daughter of her old friends.

"She ought to allow seventy-five pounds a year to her mother," she decided before she penned her epistle to Nancy; "twenty-five is ample for the dress of a girl of

her age. I shall give her a hint what she ought to do with her money."

And she gave Nancy this "hint" in her usual pronounced and open way. She wrote to her from Wrothsley the same evening that she had spoken to Lady Gilmore, and told her how she happened to be staying at the Castle, describing, as she had done to her husband, her own good services to the wounded Lord. Then she came to the pith of her letter.

"They saw, however," she wrote, "that good very often springs from evil, and in that case it has certainly done so. The assistance I was fortunately able to render Lord Gilmore has won for me the extreme gratitude of his mother, who is devoted to him, and I have availed myself of this feeling to procure a most excellent situation for you. On my recommendation alone Lady Gilmore has agreed to engage you as governess to her two little girls, at the very handsome salary of one hundred a year. I am very pleased about this arrangement, dear Nancy, because out of this sum you will be able materially to assist your mother; as five-and-twenty pounds a year will be ample for your own personal expenses here. I wish you, therefore, to come to Wrothsley at once—shall we settle to-day week?—as I shall then still be here to receive you, and induct you into your new duties. To prevent any worries or expenses to your mother about your dress or train fares, I enclose a check for twenty pounds, which I hope you will accept from your old friend, with her best love. I am very glad indeed to have been able to do so well for you, as I had a great respect and regard for your dear father, and the tone of your letter also pleased me, and I feel sure you will do credit to my recommendation.

With love to your mother,

I remain, sincerely yours,

"MARGARET BLENKENSOP."

This letter, indited in Lady Blenkinsop's firm, clear handwriting, duly arrived at the little house in the north-western suburb, where poor Mrs. Loftus and her children were still drinking the bitter cup of sorrow. More than a week had elapsed since Nancy had written to Lady Blenkinsop about procuring a situation for her, and Nancy had begun to think that her father and mother's

friend had perhaps rued of the offer she had made to endeavor to do so. Therefore Lady Blenkinsop's letter was welcome, for Nancy saw very plainly that she could not afford to live at home.

This fact had been pointed out to her also by her late father's only sister, Mrs. Barclay, or "Aunt Fannie," as this lady was very generally called in the small household. Mrs. Barclay was the widow of a naval officer, and had been abroad at the time when the news of Colonel Loftus' sudden and untimely death reached England. It was a shock to her, and disturbed her so much that she broke through the easy tenor of her ordinary life sufficiently to return to London and condole with her brother's broken-hearted widow.

But though she felt very sorry for the bereaved woman and her fatherless children, knowing well the pinched circumstances they must be left in, she had no idea of sparing any of her own small but comfortable income for their benefit.

"I have just enough to live on, you know, Lucy, so I can do nothing for the children," she told Mrs. Loftus; "and the best thing Nancy can do is to find a situation, and I am very glad to hear that she is trying to do so."

Poor Mrs. Loftus winced terribly at this advice regarding Nancy's future. "Her handsome Nancy; of whom her dear father had been so proud," she thought sorrowfully. She had secretly hoped that perhaps Mrs. Barclay would take one of the girls, for her sister-in-law led on the whole a very pleasant life. She lived in a private hotel or boarding-house, at Queen's Gate, when she was in town, and she went abroad in winter, and paid visits among her friends in the autumn, and took the greatest possible care of herself always. If she had now consented to live with Mrs. Loftus, their united incomes would have maintained the little family in comfort, but Mrs. Barclay never for a moment contemplated such a self-sacrifice.

"I cannot bear the noise of children," she confided to a friend; "poor Mrs. Loftus would have liked me to remain with them, I believe, and of course share the expenses, but I could not stand the worry; and young people, too, are always wanting something, and I really have no money to spare on them—but I am very sorry for them, poor things!"

But a week spent in the melancholy household was about enough for Mrs. Barclay, and she was just considering what excuse she could make to leave London and its fogs and gloom behind her, when Lady Blenkinsop's letter arrived for Nancy. This was duly shown to her, and "Aunt Fannie" was delighted with its contents.

"It's a splendid chance for you, my dear," she said, "and one which you never would have had if Sir Charles and Lady Blenkinsop had not respected your poor dear father as they did. And how kind of Lady Blenkinsop to send twenty pounds! And, of course, Nancy, you can easily spare seventy-five pounds a year to your mother out of your salary of a hundred; why, it will almost double her income; I am so glad!"

Nancy's pretty color deepened, but she did not speak.

"But how can I leave poor mother when she is so weak?" she said a moment later. "Unless you Aunt Fannie, could stay on with her for a little while?" she added looking wistfully at the stout comfortable-looking woman before her, with her soft dark eyes.

"My dear it is impossible, these fogs are killing me," answered Mrs. Barclay. "I had two coughing fits this morning, and felt quite depressed all yesterday with the darkness and heaviness of the atmosphere. And do not talk about not leaving your mother, Nancy! Why what's she to live on if you don't leave her? She must rouse herself, and not give way any longer; and you of course must go to Lady Gilmore's on the very day that Lady Blenkinsop names."

So it was all settled for poor Nancy. Aunt Fanny went up to Mrs. Loftus's bedroom, and talked "sensibly," pointing out how extremely lucky Nancy had been to procure such an excellent situation, and what a great assistance seventy-five pounds a year would be to herself.

"And who knows," added Aunt Fanny, warming with her subject, "that Nancy may not even marry well yet? She's a good-looking girl, and would have had no chance living in little poky rooms with you, but in a place like Wrothsley Castle there are sure to be rich young men about; and then with Lady Blenkinsop so near, too, and the General in command of the district. I should not be very much surprised even if some man in the service were to pick her up."

Mrs. Loftus' pallid cheeks flushed, and her pale lips quivered as she listened to this speech of her sister-in-law, which was spoken in perfect good faith and belief in its sense and kindness. There stood Mrs. Barclay, a little stout woman, with a drabbish-tinted complexion, ordinary features, and somewhat watery, rather blood-shot, humorous gray eyes, talking to the refined fond mother, of her pretty daughter in these coarse words, thinking all the while she was helping to raise her sister-in-law's spirits, and really pleased with herself for doing so !

And Mrs. Loftus dare not retort. The miserable, humiliating want of money kept her silent, for Aunt Fannie had her small, but certain income of five hundred a year in her own power, and who but her brother's children were likely to inherit it ? Therefore, in the interest of these children their mother was tongue-tied, and Aunt Fannie got her own way about Nancy.

“ It would be selfish, my dear Lucy, really intensely selfish,” argued the little woman, “ to keep the girl one day later at home than the day Lady Blenkinsop has fixed for her to go. It is her chance in life, and if we throw away that we never get another ; and then Lady Blenkinsop's kindness in sending the money prevents any bother about raising it.”

And Mrs. Loftus stifled back the feelings of her heart—to part with Nancy, the sweet, bright girl who had mourned with her, comforted her, loved her—made her yet fresh bitter grief more bitter still. But it had to be borne, and Mrs. Loftus tried to bear it as bravely as her poor, weak nature could. Aunt Fannie at last agreed to stay a week or so after Nancy left ; at least, she said she would do this by way of consoling Nancy about leaving her mother ; and she took her niece out to buy what she required, of course with Lady Blenkinsop's money, and even presented Nancy with a boa, which was a little worn, as she saw a new one which she thought would suit herself better.

And thus the days passed, until the one came—only too soon—when Nancy and her mother were forced to part. It is sad even to write of those last tearful kisses ; to tell how these two clasped each other's hands in silent pain. Nancy utterly broke down, and clung to her mother, until Aunt Fannie was forced to interfere, and tell Nancy some hard home truths ; reminding her she would lose her train

if she wasted any more time ; and so, pale and trembling. the poor girl drew back from her mother's fond arms.

"Write constantly, darling—tell your mother everything," whispered Mrs. Loftus.

"Come, my dear, we shall hardly reach Paddington as it is," urged Aunt Fannie, watch in hand, and a few moments later, for the first time in their lives, Nancy and her mother separated.

Nancy scarcely heard all the good advice which her aunt poured so volubly into her ears on the way to the station. Such sentences as "Be sure you lose no opportunity of expressing your gratitude to Lady Blenkinsop ; be very deferential in your manner to Lady Gilmore," were quite wasted on her, for Nancy was thinking of her poor mother, of her dear father's sad death, and the great and terrible changes which had happened to them all.

And after Aunt Fannie had kissed her, and placed her safely in a second-class railway carriage, and the train began speeding away from the din and smoke of the great City, to sombre, wintry country scenes ; past quiet homes standing amid green fields, Nancy was still thinking of the one she had just left. She was going into the world alone ; going among strangers, and all her future was doubtful and uncertain, and the girl felt afraid and sad.

For good or evil, how would it end ? Well might her heart beat fast and her face grow pale, for the life-journey she was beginning was fated to be no smooth one, and athwart the days to come a dark and tragic shadow fell.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW HOME.

It was growing dusk ; the short winter day, wrapped in murky vapors and fast-gathering gloom, when Nancy Loftus reached the quiet country station nearest Wrothslley Castle, where she had been directed by Lady Blenkinsop to leave the train.

She felt very nervous and solitary as she did this, and looked timidly along the sparsely-peopled platform to see if anyone was waiting to receive her. A moment later a

well-dressed servant approached her, and, after touching his hat, addressed her.

"Miss Loftus?" he said inquiringly. "If you are the young lady expected at the Castle, Lady Blenkinsop desired me to be on the platform when the train came in, so that I might conduct you to the carriage waiting outside."

"I am Miss Loftus," answered Nancy rather tremblingly, "I—I must see after my luggage."

"Allow me to do that," answered the well-bred servant. "If you will kindly name the number of your trunks and packages, I shall see to their safety."

Nancy named the modest number, and these were speedily placed on the platform, and then transported to a light luggage cart which was also waiting outside the station; and then Nancy herself was conducted by the servant to the carriage which had been sent for her.

She sank back on the luxurious cushions of this with a half-frightened sigh, as the two splendid bays which drew it tossed their rosetted heads, and started on their homeward journey. This carriage was a symbol, as it were, of everything at Wrothsley, where money was of no object, and was spent lavishly both by the young lord and his mother. This was all new to Nancy, who, even in her father's time, had to consider every shilling, and who with her mother even then had contrived her pretty fresh dresses at small cost.

The evidences of great wealth, therefore, seemed at first oppressive to her, and when she at length arrived at the Castle and found herself in the magnificent entrance-hall, poor Nancy scarcely knew where to turn. But she was not forgotten; as she was timidly speaking to the servant, who had been waiting on the platform for her, about her luggage, a stately lady was descending the lofty staircase behind her, and a few moments later Lady Blenkinsop, who had given orders that she was to be told immediately Miss Loftus arrived, laid her hand lightly on Nancy's shoulder, who started and looked round.

"Well, my dear, how are you?" said this kind, if somewhat self-opiniated, woman; and she stooped down and kissed the sweet girlish face, and Nancy remembered at once that this was her father and mother's friend, Lady Blenkinsop, whom she had met occasionally in India.

"I am glad to see you," went on Lady Blenkinsop, "and I trust you left your mother fairly well? But you

must tell me all the home news presently ; come with me now and have some tea in the room I call mine."

So Nancy followed Lady Blenkinsop up the broad staircase, the balustrades of which were of wrought-iron work, with crowns and tassels hanging down between them from cords twisted into knots and festoons, and beautifully painted and relieved with gold.

"That is considered a great gem," said Lady Blenkinsop, pausing one moment, and pointing out a painting by Holbein ; but it was one of many. Sir Thomas Gifford, before he became Lord Gilmore, spent an enormous sum of money on the magnificent collection of paintings he had left behind him, and the last lord had added to this, and the walls of all the reception rooms in the house were adorned with the works of the great masters.

"It will take you some little time to learn your way about, it is such a great place," continued Lady Blenkinsop, kindly. "But here we are at my little den, which is more comfortable to my mind than the big rooms unless they are full of company."

She pushed open a door as she spoke, and entered a small room hung with rich satin damask, and containing some wonderfully beautiful and costly furniture. Here were Indian marble tables inlaid with precious stones, and vases of Indian filigree work, also jewelled with precious stones, and a choice collection of Sèvres, Dresden, and other china.

"You see what it is to be rich," said Lady Blenkinsop, smiling as she attracted Nancy's attention to one or two of these pieces of china. "This is really Lady Gilmore's own room, but since the young lord's accident she has given it up to me, as she lives entirely in his suite of rooms. She is certainly a most devoted mother, and there is good news to-day to cheer her, for the doctors consider Gilmore now almost out of danger."

She rang for tea as she spoke, and then, while Nancy was drinking it, talked to her in a sensible way, and gave her some excellent advice.

"Lady Gilmore is a warm-hearted, excitable woman, difficult to deal with at times, I should say, but then everyone is, and I am sure for my sake she will be kind to you ; and the children are nice little things, and talk in the most old-fashioned way imaginable. They are full of curiosity to see you, and wonder very much what you are like ;" and Lady Blenkinsop laughed.

"I shall be very glad to make their acquaintance," smiled Nancy, whose pretty color had now stolen back into her smooth round cheeks.

"I shall bring them presently, but you have had a long cold journey, and will be all the better for a little rest."

"I feel quite rested now—I was a little bit afraid, you know—but you are so kind."

Nancy had a charming manner, and a charming face, and as she said these simple words, Lady Blenkinsop looked at her keenly.

"She is too good-looking I am afraid," she was thinking, and again she glanced at the slender, black-robed figure, and thought sadly enough of the soldier father lying in his Indian grave.

She roused herself with a suppressed sigh.

"I will introduce the children to you now," she said, rising and leaving the room, and a few minutes later she returned with the twin girls: Miss Dorothy (Dossy), who always took the lead somehow, and had been born a few minutes before the other, advancing first, and as she neared Nancy she held out her small hand.

"Good evening. I am glad to see you," she said; "I hope you had a pleasant journey?" and before Nancy could reply Flossy echoed her sister's words.

"And now, my dears," said Lady Blenkinsop, laying a hand on the shoulder of each little girl, "I hope you will always be very good and kind to Miss Loftus. You must remember she is a great friend of mine."

"As she is your friend, Lady Blenkinsop, of course we shall," replied Dossy, with unmoved gravity.

"Of course we shall," affirmed Flossy.

And not only with these children did Nancy find that to be "Lady Blenkinsop's friend" gave her a certain position in the household which otherwise she certainly would not have possessed. In her warm-hearted dictatorial way indeed Lady Blenkinsop gave everyone to understand that she expected Nancy to be treated with the consideration and respect that she thought due to *her* friend. She insisted upon Nancy dining with her this first evening downstairs, and would listen to no excuse on the subject.

"It will be quite time enough to begin your duties as governess to-morrow, my dear," she said, "to-night you are my guest, and I wish the people in the house to know

that you are the daughter of a man for whom I had the highest respect."

So Nancy dined in the small dining-room alone with Lady Blenkinsop, and after dinner was finished, that lady took her over some of the state apartments of the house; the magnificent dining-room, the large drawing-room, and the library, a beautiful room, fitted with rich Spanish mahogany, and containing a splendid collection of English and foreign literature, including some rare editions of Caxton, and other early printers, and some choice manuscripts.

"Yet I do not suppose," said Lady Blenkinsop, "that anyone in this house ever takes a book down! Lady Gilmore is certainly no reader, and the young Lord—well, I know very little of him, but I dare say the comic papers of the day are more to his taste. But it's a magnificent house, isn't it? The pictures alone are of enormous value, and it would take days to go over them all properly. There is a wonderful Rubens somewhere, but I forget in which room it is—but now, my dear, you must be tired. You have seen enough for one night, and it is quite time you were in bed. I will go with you to your room, and see that you have everything comfortable."

And Lady Blenkinsop actually did this, though Nancy urged her not to give herself the trouble. It was a pretty room where she found herself at length alone; Lady Blenkinsop having kissed her and left her for the night, and as Nancy sat down by the bright fire and looked around, she felt that this trying day had ended much better than she had ever hoped for.

"But it is all Lady Blenkinsop," she thought, gratefully. "How good she is; mother must write and thank her for all her kindness."

At the same moment "Mother" was praying with bended knees and clasped hands for this darling child. Nancy, the first-born, the little beauty, who had been the joy and pride of the modest household ever since the father had taken the tiny, pink baby hand in his large, brown one, and raised it tenderly and pressed it to his lips. And now this loved one was far away, and the widowed mother was doubly desolate. Even Aunt Fannie had felt rather dull when she had seen the last glimpse of Nancy's sweet face, as the train carried her away, though she felt it her duty to impress on Mrs. Loftus during the

rest of the day how thankful they all ought to be that Nancy had a chance of doing so well.

"God bless her, God bless her," murmured the mother, with tears she could not suppress stealing down her pale cheeks, as Aunt Fannie ended her well-meant admonition.

"She has been most fortunate, my dear Lucy."

"Yes," said Mrs. Loftus, meekly, and she rose and left the room, and when alone in many a deep and heartfelt prayer asked for protection and blessings for her child.

And it did, indeed, seem at first as though Nancy had been "most fortunate" in her new home at Wrothsley. The children took quite a fancy to her; Miss Dorothy informing Lady Blenkinsop with infinite gravity the second day of her arrival there, that "Miss Loftus seemed a very nice young person."

"Say young lady, my dear," corrected Lady Blenkinsop.

"But mother always calls the governesses 'young persons,'" argued Miss Dorothy.

"Miss Loftus is a lady by birth," said Lady Blenkinsop, amused by the child's persistency; and on this second day also Nancy saw her employer, Lady Gilmore, for the first time.

She saw a woman with dark hair and eyes, who somehow gave you the impression of a strong and wayward will, and warm and ardent feelings hidden away under a cold exterior. Lady Gilmore entered the schoolroom with Lady Blenkinsop, and only bowed gravely when Lady Blenkinsop introduced Nancy to her. Then, as if she suddenly had remembered something, she made a step forward and offered her hand.

"I had half forgotten she was your friend," she said with a smile, looking back at Lady Blenkinsop.

"Yes," answered Lady Blenkinsop, with some emphasis, "her father and mother have been friends of myself and my husband for years."

"I remember you told me; it makes every difference," replied Lady Gilmore, and again she fixed her dark eyes on Nancy's face.

"I hope the children have been good to you?" she said.

"Oh, yes," answered Nancy, smiling.

"You look very young," continued Lady Gilmore.

"I am nineteen."

"Well, that is not very old ; but I don't want my girls to study too much yet ; I want them to have plenty of play and exercise, and a young person like yourself can join them and help them in their amusements. Kindly take them for a walk in the park every fine day, and if they are naughty let me know, but don't punish them without telling me."

"The last one slapped us," said Miss Dorothy, putting in her word ; "so mother sent her away."

"She was a fool," said Lady Gilmore, sharply.

"I am sure both Dossy and Flossy mean to be very good to Miss Loftus," suggested Lady Blenkinsop, by way of changing the drift of the conversation.

"Oh, yes !" replied both the little girls in one breath.

The mother looked from one to the other, and then bent down and kissed each fair head.

"Poor brother is better," she said softly ; the whole expression of her face, changing as she spoke.

"Please give our love to him," said Dossy. "Can we not see him yet ?"

"No, no," replied Lady Gilmore ; "he has to be kept perfectly quiet—but he is better, thank God, thank God !"

She said these last words with deep emotion, and for a moment or two afterwards her lips continued as if in silent prayer. Then, with a sort of effort, she roused herself, and again bowing gravely to Nancy, turned to leave the room.

"Good morning, Miss Loftus," she said, and passed her arm through Lady Blenkinsop's ; and as the two ladies proceeded together along the corridor outside, Lady Gilmore spoke of Nancy.

"You did not tell me she was pretty ?" she said.

"Did I not ?" answered Lady Blenkinsop, with affected carelessness. "I know some people think her pretty ; I call her good-looking."

"No, she is pretty," persisted the other ; "with such a complexion any woman would be," and Lady Gilmore sighed impatiently. Perhaps she was thinking of the days when her Lord had sometimes flouted her with her dark skin and sallow cheeks.

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS LETTER.

LADY BLENKENSOP left Wrothsley three days after Nancy's arrival there, as she was becoming anxious to see after the welfare of her General and her household, feeling sure that both would be most uncomfortable without her. But before she quitted the Castle, she promised very soon to return.

"And I shall arrange my next visit so, my dear," she told Nancy, "that I shall be able to take you back with me to spend the Saturday and Sunday; the General I am sure will be pleased to see you for your poor father's sake, and then it will please your mother to know that you have been on a visit to us."

Nancy thanked her warmly for all her kindness.

"My dear, it has been a pleasure to me to be of service to you," replied Lady Blenkinsop; "and I hope you will do all you can to please Lady Gilmore. Make no reply to any little outbursts of temper which you may have to encounter, for Lady Gilmore's life I fancy has not been a very smooth one, and she is excitable and easily upset. But if you are gentle and patient with her, I am sure her heart is in the right place."

"I will try to be," said Nancy modestly, and after much further good advice Lady Blenkinsop kissed the girl and went away, and Nancy was left to face her new life alone.

At first it was a very quiet one, for the children and the maid who waited on them were the only persons Nancy saw to speak to, except on the rare occasions when Lady Gilmore visited the schoolroom. Nancy felt too shy to wander about the great house alone, but when she and her young pupils went out for their daily walk in the park, she used sometimes to pause to admire the pictures on the grand staircase, while Miss Dossy in very erroneous sums explained their great value.

Then, after having been absent a fortnight, Lady Blenkinsop returned for a brief visit to Wrothsley, and before she came she arranged with Lady Gilmore that Nancy

was to accompany her home, and stay with her a day or two. The General rented a country house some twelve miles from Wrothsley, called Greystone Lodge, and Nancy naturally looked forward with pleasure to the idea of going there, as the life she led at the Castle was certainly not a very lively one.

Lady Blenkinsop's arrival therefore caused quite a little excitement to Nancy, who eagerly awaited her appearance in the schoolroom, and Lady Gilmore also received her with the warmest welcome.

"Gilmore is so much better," she told her as she kissed Lady Blenkinsop on both cheeks; "his voice is stronger, and it does not tire him to talk a little now."

"Then has he explained how he was wounded?" asked Lady Blenkinsop, with some curiosity.

Lady Gilmore's radiant expression clouded at this question.

"I cannot quite make it out," she answered, "and—of course, this is between ourselves—I fancy he is keeping something back. He says he knows nothing about it; that he heard a shot, and the next moment the bullet struck him—but I cannot help thinking that with the great generosity of his nature he is sheltering someone, for he is very reserved on the subject."

"But who could wish to injure him?"

"How can one tell," answered Lady Gilmore, with growing excitement; "he is young and handsome, and some man may be jealous of him. It is all surmise on my part, but still I cannot help my thoughts."

Lady Blenkinsop revolved in her mind at this moment whether or not she should tell the anxious mother of the cardinal-colored ribbon bow which had been picked up on the spot where Lord Gilmore lay wounded, and which was still in her possession. There had been a considerable amount of gossip in the neighborhood regarding the young Lord's assailant, and we may be sure that the maid who found the bow had not been quite silent on the subject. Lady Blenkinsop, to do her justice, had, with the exception of her husband, and the General had shrugged his shoulders when he listened to the story.

"Most likely some woman that he has goaded on to madness by his inconstancy," he said; "I should advise you to say nothing about it."

Therefore, after thinking a moment, Lady Blenkinsop

did not speak now. But what Lady Gilmore had told her of Gilmore's reticence confirmed her husband's idea in her mind.

"As you say, one cannot tell," she said, quietly; "it may have been a chance shot, and it may have been an intentional one; at all events, it is a great mercy and blessing to you that Gilmore is getting well."

"It is more than that!" cried Lady Gilmore, fervently; "it is life or death to me. I could not have lived if my darling had passed away."

"There is no fear now," answered Lady Blenkinsop kindly; and yet the very next morning a great change for the worse took place in Gilmore's condition.

This was undoubtedly caused by the arrival of a letter which came by the post. Lady Gilmore herself opened the postbag in his room, which a servant had just brought in, and handed among others a letter to Gilmore in a man's handwriting, which he glanced at carelessly.

"I don't know the writing," he said, and then tore open the envelope with his left hand, which was the only one he was allowed to use, the wound being near the right shoulder, the bone of which the bullet had broken.

As he read the first lines of the letter, he started up in bed with a hoarse cry.

"Gilmore! What is it?" exclaimed Lady Gilmore, greatly alarmed, hurrying to the bedside.

"My God! How could she be so mad—the mad, mad, girl!" continued Gilmore, who was pale, excited, and seemed scarcely conscious of what he was saying.

"My dear, what has happened?" implored his mother. "Let me see this letter."

But as she placed her trembling hand on it, Gilmore clutched it from her grasp.

"You must not see it," he said hastily, adding the next moment almost below his breath, "this is terrible—too terrible!"

He seemed quite overcome, and fell back on the pillows as though about to faint, whilst Lady Gilmore stood gazing at him, terrified and afraid. Then, after a minute's silence, he again raised himself, and once more read the letter he still held grasped in his hand.

"Give me my check book," he said, in an agitated voice. "I must send some money at once."

"But, my dearest, you cannot write," faltered Lady Gilmore.

"I must," he added, imperiously. "Reach me that small desk, mother, here, and open that drawer in the table there, and hand me the check book."

Lady Gilmore dared not refuse, and placed the desk and the check book on the bed; and Gilmore laboriously and painfully at once commenced to fill in a check for five hundred pounds, payable to a doctor's name, which he again referred to in the letter before he wrote it. He then turned the check on the blotting pad, and tried to write a letter with his stiff, cramped hand, though every word he wrote gave him severe pain. Suddenly he dropped his pen with a groan.

"I can't do it—it tortures me so," he half moaned, and his pallor grew so great that Lady Gilmore ventured to go up to the bed, and knelt down beside it.

"Let me write it for you, Gilmore," she prayed, "whatever it is. You can trust me, and you know the doctors said you were not to use your right hand."

Again Gilmore groaned and closed his eyes, as if in extreme pain, and Lady Gilmore glanced at the few irregular lines which he had written, and which lay open on the small desk still, after the pen had fallen from his powerless grasp.

"Sir," she read, "your news has been a terrible shock to me, and I hasten——"

His strength had failed him here, and Lady Gilmore dare ask no questions. She rose hastily, and procured a restorative, and held it to his white trembling lips, and presently Gilmore revived a little.

"Let me finish the letter for you, my dear?" she half-whispered; and after lying a moment or two in silence, and feeling that he was physically incapable of writing anymore, Gilmore consented.

"Will you address an envelope then to Dr. Robertson—yes, that is the name," and he once more referred to the letter he had received, and then named a certain number in St. George's Road, S. W., in town; "and add below what I have written here, that I am not well enough to write more; but that I wish to hear by telegram when he receives this—how his patient is getting on—and that he must write daily; and I will send more money whenever it is required."

As Gilmore paused, exhausted by these directions, Lady Gilmore, with a white face and trembling hands, prepared herself for her task.

She drew a chair near the bed, and took the little desk on her knee, and she noticed as she did so that Gilmore with his left hand pushed the letter which had brought him the ill news (whatever it was) under his pillow, evidently for the purpose of concealing it from her eyes. But she said nothing; she wrote the words he had dictated, commencing "Lord Gilmore being too ill to finish this letter, he has authorized me to do so," and then followed his directions, all of which she put down without comment. When she had finished for the first time she raised her dark eyes to his face.

"What name shall I sign?" she asked, with a ring of anguish and reproach in her voice she could not quite conceal.

"I shall try to sign it with my left hand," answered Gilmore, and he did so; his mother holding the desk while he scrawled his name.

"Now seal it, mother, and send it by a special messenger to the post; let not a moment be lost," he said, as he sank back exhausted: and still without a question Lady Gilmore left the room to comply with his request.

When she returned Gilmore was suffering so much pain, and seemed so restless and uneasy, that Lady Gilmore secretly despatched a telegram to summon the doctors from town. She told Lady Blenkinsop this, but suppressed the whole episode of the letter he had received, and the answer he had dictated. She did this from a feeling of loyalty to him, from the idea that all this had been forced on her knowledge only by his helpless condition. But it made her intensely miserable, this mystery, this uncertainty, she told herself, was more to bear than even very bitter news.

She was fated to hear some, however, before the day was over. The doctors from town duly arrived, and found Gilmore feverish and in pain, and it was soon discovered that he had displaced part of the not yet united bone, which had to be set again, and for a day or two he was very ill. Telegrams and letters came for him constantly, and he seemed very anxious to receive these, and again dictated a letter to Dr. Robertson, at St. George's Road, expressing his satisfaction that "his patient" was improving. He made no explanation to his mother as to who this "patient" was, and Lady Gilmore crushed back the words that rose on her lips, lest her inquiries might either hurt or worry this beloved son.

Lady Blenkinsop stayed two days longer at Wrothsley than she originally had intended, on account of this relapse of Lord Gilmore. And during these two days her quick eyes began to perceive that Lady Gilmore was keeping something back from her ; that she had some knowledge now about her son she did not impart.

“She has found out something,” thought Lady Blenkinsop a little grimly, but she did not hint this to the poor lady whose face had grown thinner and paler, and whose dark eyes had a darker shadow around them than usual. Nor did she say anything to Nancy Loftus of her suspicions. She took Nancy and the children out to drive with her, and she was a good deal thrown with Nancy, as Lady Gilmore scarcely left her son, and Lady Blenkinsop was a woman who did not like to be alone.

She indeed entered with the greatest interest into the schoolroom studies, and found, somewhat to her concealed amusement, that Nancy was by no means a proficient governess ; indeed that she had little or no method in her teachings. But it was Lady Blenkinsop’s nature to advise and direct, and Nancy was too grateful to her not eagerly to try and follow her suggestions ; and, finally, when Gilmore was a little better again, Lady Blenkinsop took Nancy home with her for three days, feeling pleased that it was in her power to give her young friend this little holiday.

And Nancy was very glad to go, and enjoyed the twelve miles’ drive to Greystone Lodge, and looked so bright and fresh, and pretty, when she got there, that the general declared to his wife she was far too handsome a girl to be a governess.

“Some young fellow is sure to fall in love with her,” he told Lady Blenkinsop ; and the next day, without first asking her leave, he invited two men to dine with them, and when Nancy entered the drawing-room before dinner she found it already occupied by two strangers.

One of these was Sir John Oakes, a rich young baronet, in a cavalry regiment, which was stationed in the district the General commanded, and the other was Mr. Ayde, of the same regiment, who also was supposed to be endowed with a good fortune. The two men turned round surprised as the pretty girl went into the room, and then both bowed.

“Lady Blenkinsop will be down directly, I think,” said

Nancy, in her sweet voice, as she returned their salutations. "I did not know anyone was here."

Sir John Oakes was not good-looking, but he had a pleasant smile, and was tall and stalwart; but Mr. Ayde was handsome, or rather his features were regular, and he was apparently very well satisfied with his own appearance.

Nancy had a charming manner, and had of course during her poor father's lifetime been accustomed constantly to receive and talk to the officers of his regiment, and in the most natural way she now began to talk to these young men. Therefore, when Lady Blenkinsop appeared—who had not been over pleased that her General should have invited them without her leave—she found quite an animated conversation going on, and having shaken hands with Sir John Oakes and Mr. Ayde, she said inquiringly:—

"Have you met Miss Loftus before?"

"Not had the pleasure," answered Sir John in his blunt, almost school-boy fashion, for this young fellow had only recently joined his regiment, and his manner was very jerky and unformed.

Then Lady Blenkinsop introduced them formally, and Sir John's round, good-natured brown eyes, seemed unable to tear themselves away from the constant contemplation of Nancy's pretty face during the dinner which followed.

And when Lady Blenkinsop and Nancy retired, he instantly began to talk of her to the General.

"Very handsome girl that," he said, an ingenuous blush stealing over his homely yet not unpleasant features.

"And as good as she is good-looking," answered the General.

"Does—she live in this neighborhood?" inquired Sir John.

Upon this, the General related Nancy's pathetic little story, and told of her father's tragic death, and the girl's efforts to help her bereaved mother.

"I know Gilmore," said Sir John hastily, when the General paused; and he mentally determined at this moment to look up Gilmore, as he would have expressed it: and when he, the General, and Mr. Ayde returned to the drawing-room, with an effort, and after a moment's shy hesitation, he crossed the room and sat down by Nancy's side.

"You—you live at Wrothsley, the General tells me?" he began.

"Yes," and it was now Nancy's turn to blush and hesitate a second: "I—I am governess to Lady Gilmore's children."

"I have meant for ever so long to ride over and inquire after Gilmore," went on Sir John nervously. "I know him very well. You know what a terrible business his accident was, but he's getting on all right I hear."

"He was not so well, I believe, the end of last week," answered Nancy, "but when Lady Blenkinsop and I left he was better again."

"You—you know him of course?"

"No," said Nancy, smiling, "I have never even seen him."

"Oh! he's rather a good-looking fellow—I wonder if——," and here Sir John paused, and his face grew crimson.

"Well?" smiled Nancy.

"I meant—I wonder if I rode over to Wrothsley, I would—have any chance of seeing you?" blurted out the young man, and in answer Nancy shook her head.

"I am sure you would not," she said. "I never see anyone there but the children."

"But that's a shame!"

"I am there to look after them, you know."

"Oh, that's all very fine, but I think it's a horrid shame to shut up anyone—like you—in the schoolroom all day."

Again Nancy smilingly shook her head; this young man amused her with his boyish manner, and his earnestness, and the expression of admiration in his brown eyes.

He talked to her the whole evening in the same simple fashion, though Lady Blenkinsop presently considered it her duty to join in the conversation, and he called at the General's the next day, and sat so long that Lady Blenkinsop again considered it her duty to warn Nancy against the passing attentions of young officers.

"They like to amuse themselves with every good-looking girl they see, you know," she said.

Nancy laughed her fresh girlish laugh.

"They are not always very amusing to the good-looking girls though, are they?" she answered.

"No, my dear, but still in your position you ought to be very careful."

Nancy blushed a little angrily.

"You see," continued Lady Blenkinsop, "it would never do for you to see anything of Gilmore's friends at Wrothsley, and Sir John Oakes knows him, he tells me."

"I do not wish to see Sir John Oakes or any of his friends," said Nancy quickly; so quickly that during the day Lady Blenkinsop delivered a matrimonial lecture to Sir Charles on the folly of introducing young men to Nancy Loftus.

"It might even lose her the excellent situation I took such trouble to get for her," she said.

"Nonsense," answered the General, sharply; "the best thing for the girl would be if she could pick up a good husband."

"But you know very well young men in the position of Sir John Oakes would never think of her seriously now."

"Wouldn't they?" retorted General Sir Charles, who was a fiery little man to everyone but his wife; "if they thought of her any way else they would hear of it from me, I can tell you."

"Nevertheless Lady Blenkinsop was not satisfied about this new acquaintance of Nancy's, and did not urge her to remain at Greystone Lodge a day longer than her visit had originally been fixed for; and when Sir John Oakes again called at the General's he found that Miss Loftus was gone.

He was greatly disappointed and went back to the cavalry barracks in the neighboring town, and raved to Mr. Ayde of Nancy's charms, and Mr. Ayde being of a cynical turn of mind—or affected to be—was amused at the young man's ardor.

"Well, I ask you, did you ever see anyone so pretty before?" inquired Sir John enthusiastically.

"I've seen someone about equally good-looking, I think," answered Mr. Ayde, smiling; "all the same it's undoubtedly true Gilmore has got a very pretty governess to take care of."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST GLIMPSE.

IT must be admitted that Nancy went back to Wrothsley feeling not a little hurt and sore on the subject of Lady Blenkinsop's remarks about Sir John Oakes. She thought, and justly, that they were uncalled for, as she had certainly made no effort to attract him ; and if he did chance to admire her, what pretty girl is there who feels angry at such a natural tribute to her charms ?

She smiled somewhat archly, therefore, when early on the afternoon of the second day, after her return to the Castle, she saw from the schoolroom windows, Sir John himself riding up to the principal entrance, where he held a long parley with one of the footmen, while his eyes wandered vainly over the great house. Nancy knew very well why he had called, and that his inquiries after Lord Gilmore were only an excuse for his appearance ; and she was amused also to see how slowly he rode away, and what lingering glances he cast around.

He returned three days later, and this time he was admitted, Gilmore having given orders to the effect that if Sir John Oakes called again that he would see him. Thus the young man obtained his heart's desire, and was once more under the same roof with the charming girl he so greatly admired, though that roof was so vast he had little, if any, chance of ever seeing her.

But he saw Lord Gilmore ; saw the tall, good-looking owner of all this great wealth, lying on a couch pale and wan, but still handsome. There was, indeed, no doubt about this man's personal attractions, and in his smiling, bright hazel eyes, there was a certain gleam of self-pride, a knowledge, as it were, that he had been more favored by fortune than his neighbors. He was glad to see Sir John Oakes, for he was weary of his sick-room, and sometimes of his own thoughts, and held out his left hand as Sir John entered the room.

" Well, Oakes, very good of you to come to see me, Excuse my left hand."

"I should have come before," replied Sir John a little consciously, "but they told me you could see no one. I am glad you are getting on all right now."

"I am pulling myself together a bit, but I lost such a tremendous lot of blood, you know."

"However did the accident happen?"

Gilmore frowned ever so slightly.

"Can't conceive. Know no more than you do. I heard a shot, felt myself hit, and I lay bleeding to death until I became unconscious, and then I believe some of the keepers found me."

"It's an extraordinary business."

"Not pleasant to talk of or remember. Well, how wags the world with you, old man?"

Sir John was not very bright, but still he saw plainly that Gilmore wished to change the conversation, and in his simple, boyish way, he did his best to try and amuse Gilmore during the next quarter of an hour, all the while wondering how he could best introduce the name of Miss Loftus.

At last he blurted it out.

"I met someone from here the other day," he said, "Miss Loftus."

"Never heard of her," answered Gilmore.

"Oh, she's a tremendously handsome girl," continued young Oakes. "I never saw such a complexion before, and altogether it's a lovely face."

"My dear fellow," said Gilmore amused, "is she one of the maids? If so, you've been more lucky than I have, for I have never seen a good-looking one amongst them."

"One of the maids! Of course not," replied Sir John, quite angrily. "She is Colonel Loftus' daughter, who was killed quite recently out in India, and she's here as governess to your little sisters."

"All this is highly interesting," said Gilmore, with a light laugh. "Governess to my little sisters? I forget where the schoolroom is situated exactly, but I must find out."

"Oh, but she's not a girl that you can talk to like—that," said Sir John eagerly, "she's a lady, and a proud one, too, I can tell you. I met her at Sir Charles Blenkinsop's."

"Then, no doubt, she has appeared here through Lady

Blenkensop. That good woman has been staying with my mother since my illness, and, no doubt, your scholastic divinity came under her wing."

"But she's not a blue-stocking, or anything of that kind, you know."

"No? And did you come here to-day to call upon her, Oakes?" asked Gilmore, a little sarcastically, fixing his smiling eyes on the young baronet's eager face.

"Of course not. All the same, I wish I could see her," truthfully answered Sir John.

"Let me see—how can I aid love's young dream? Ah, my dear fellow, take the advice of an older man, and keep out of her way, and if she throws herself on yours, turn and fly. These sort of women bring nothing but trouble."

"But you don't understand. She's a young lady, just as much a lady as Lady Mabel Bute, or Miss Cadogan, or any of them. Her father was a gentleman, and it's only because he got killed, poor old chap, out pig-sticking, that she had to do anything, and she does it to help her mother, who's got a lot of other children."

"She's a paragon of virtue by your account, but all the same, I don't believe in that sort of thing; they are all pretty much alike."

"You don't believe in anything good, Gilmore," said Sir John, indignantly.

"Yes, I do, I believe in good looks, and a hundred other good things; but I don't believe in good women, nor men either for that matter. But it strikes me you are pretty hard hit, old fellow?"

Sir John blushed, but answered manfully:

"If you mean that I admire Miss Loftus, I certainly do."

"I wonder if I shall admire her," said Gilmore, with a careless laugh: and his manner as he said these words made Sir John feel more angry still, and presently he took his leave and left Wrothsley without having seen a glimpse of Miss Loftus, and feeling that he had done a foolish thing to talk of her to Gilmore.

And he had done a foolish thing, for he had excited Gilmore's curiosity. The young Lord rose from his couch with an amused and languid smile after he left, and went and stood leaning against the mantel-piece for a few minutes, wondering how he could see the pretty gov-

erness without exciting any gossip among the household. His mother, he knew, was out of the way, for Lady Gilmore had driven over to Greystone Lodge to convey to Lady Blenkinsop the very handsomest, and most expensive cloak of sables and velvet that could be purchased in town, to replace the one which Lady Blenkinsop had sacrificed for Gilmore's benefit. He knew where the school-room and the children's rooms were perfectly well, though he had affected to Sir John not to do so, for his early days had been spent there; and he knew also that the suite of rooms he now occupied was connected by a short staircase to the long corridor in which the school-room was situated. The door to this staircase was, however, always kept locked; and with a little contemptuous smile at his own folly, Gilmore, some ten minutes after Sir John left, proceeded slowly to this door, and when he reached it perceived that the key was in the lock.

He turned this, descended the short staircase, though he felt the exertion was almost too much for him. But it was a little adventure, and Gilmore was daring, and weary of the monotony of his mother's society, and so he went on. The corridor was of great length, the rooms all being on the right side of it, while at the left, here and there, a niched window showed views and glimpses of the park. Above and around these windows were ancient armor, the corridor being actually called the armory, so large and valuable was the collection it contained. And as Gilmore walked on, with his right arm in a sling, and his somewhat languid footsteps supported by a stick, he stopped once or twice to examine and admire some of the pieces, which he had not actually seen since he was a boy, when this corridor had been one of his favorite playgrounds.

He was standing thus, close to one of the windows, when a small hand, on what seemed to be a portion of a woman's black gown, attracted his attention. Gilmore moved a step forward, and saw a girl lying fast asleep on a couch placed in one of the niched windows. He half-started as he looked at her; it seemed so unreal this young sleeping face, with the rosy lips a little apart; there beneath the grim weapons of ancient days, frowning down upon her. He guessed in a moment who it was—the beauty John Oakes had raved about—and as Gilmore looked at her, he admitted to himself that the youngster had not spoken without cause.

"A charming face," he muttered to himself below his breath, as he scanned the delicate features, the fair, blooming complexion wonderfully contrasted with the dark hair and brows. He could not look away; the white throat, the bosom heaving with the placid breath of sleep, and the appearance of extreme youth—for Nancy Loftus did not look her years—fascinated his beauty-loving eyes, and he stood gazing at her until the unconscious Nancy slightly stirred.

On this Gilmore noiselessly as possible drew back. He felt it would startle the girl to know that she had been watched, and that his sudden appearance in the corridor might alarm and embarrass her. As quietly as he could, therefore, he retraced his steps, and soon found himself on the staircase which communicated with his own suite of rooms. He ascended this, and with a sudden thought—he could not have entirely explained his reasons, even to himself—as he passed through the door leading to his own apartments, he turned and locked it and carried away the key.

He laughed softly to himself when he reached his own bedroom. He felt excited and amused; this first glimpse of Nancy's face seemed to have put fresh life into his languid pulses and wearied frame, and when an hour or so later Lady Gilmore returned, and at once hurried to his side, she found Gilmore with a slight flush on his pale cheeks, and a brightness in his hazel eyes she had not seen there since he was wounded.

"How well you are looking, my darling!" she exclaimed, with almost passionate joy. "I have thought of you every moment that I have been away. I was afraid you might have been so lonely, so dull."

"I feel much better to-day," answered Gilmore. "I fancy, mother, I shall be able to go out for a little while to-morrow. Well, and how is the energetic Lady Blenkinsop?"

"Wonderfully well, and so kind. As soon as you are able, Gilmore, you must see her and thank her for all she did."

"All right. I've had a visitor to-day too—John Oakes."

"Has he been here? I hope you did not tire yourself by talking to him too much, dear?"

"It did me good. He's rather a nice lad too, but sadly youthful for his years."

“I have scarcely spoken to him ; but had you not better lie down now, my dear, I am so afraid of you tiring yourself?”

Gilmore, after a little persuasion, consented to follow this maternal advice, but the sweet face of Nancy Loftus haunted him too much to allow him for a long time to sleep ; and even when he did sink into a restless slumber, he dreamt of a girl lying unconscious beneath a suspended sword.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST MEETING.

THE next day Gilmore saw from one of the windows of his room, Nancy Loftus and her two young pupils returning from their usual walk in the park, and he attracted his mother's attention to them, who happened to be near him.

“Look mother, there are the chicks ! Who is that girl with them ?” he said.

“Oh, that is a young person that Lady Blenkinsop recommended as a nursery governess to them, when you were so ill,” answered Lady Gilmore, with a certain reserve in her tone which amused Gilmore.

“And how does she suit ?” he asked.

“Very well, I think ; she seems a quiet, respectable sort of girl.”

Gilmore asked no more questions, and began talking in his careless way of something else. But he insisted on going out for a short walk during the same afternoon, and felt not a little impatient because his mother persisted in accompanying him. He had grown suddenly weary indeed of her constant and devoted attendance, and it bored him that she watched his every look. Yet he felt it would be ungrateful and heartless to show this, and so went out with her, choosing to walk up and down the terrace extending along the front of the house, and he thus passed and re-passed several times the wing where the schoolroom was situated. The children saw him from the windows, and Miss Dossy, immediately followed by Miss Flossy, began wildly waving their handkerchiefs at him, which form of salute Gilmore returned, and he

thought he caught a passing glimpse of another face besides ; but it was only for a moment that Nancy looked out, and Lady Gilmore, glancing sharply up at the school-room windows, saw no appearance of the governess.

"Call them down, mother," said Gilmore. And Lady Gilmore therefore sent a message up to Miss Loftus by one of the servants, that she was to allow "the young ladies" to come on the terrace to speak to their brother, and very soon the two children were rapturously kissing him.

He chatted to them good-naturedly, promised them all sorts of things when he went to town, but he never named the person he was really thinking of.

"Gilmore, do you know we have a new governess?" said Dossy presently.

"Have you? Well, how do you like her?" he answered.

"Oh, awfully. She's a lady, you know. Lady Blenkinsop brought her."

"I hope she keeps you in good order?"

"She never scolds, scarcely. You see she has a little sister of her own, and a baby sister, and that makes such a difference. The last one was a horrid old maid, wasn't she, mother?"

"She was a very unpleasant person, at all events," replied Lady Gilmore.

"And this is really a pleasant young person," said Dossy, authoritatively. "You think her pleasant, don't you mother, and pretty?"

"I know very little about her," answered Lady Gilmore, repressively. "Come, my dears, you will tire your brother if you talk any more. Go back now to your lessons."

Thus the children were dismissed, and in a little while Gilmore grew weary, and returned also to the house ; but he had got tired of having his mother always by his side, and gave her such a decided hint the next time he went out, that he would rather go without her, that Lady Gilmore abruptly retired from his rooms, and when alone in her own, burst into a passionate fit of tears.

"Ah, he has no heart, no heart!" she cried in bitterness, "I who would give my life for him—who have given more than life!"

But she subdued all signs of this emotion before she

saw him again. She knew too well the pleasure-loving temperament he had inherited from his father would resent any outburst which made him uncomfortable. The late Lord Gilmore had hated the sight of tears, and the sound of reproach, as his Dorothy had learnt by bitter experience, for if she ever indulged in any displays of temper or disappointed affections, he invariably absented himself from her presence and remained away long enough to bring her to her knees.

Thus when she saw Gilmore again she smiled on him, and hid as best she could the wound that he had given to her warm and wayward heart. But he understood her nature better than she thought, and was quite aware that she had been grieved and angry, but was also aware that her continued presence worried him, and Gilmore never cared to be worried long.

But she made no attempt to go out with him again unless he asked her. He was gathering strength daily now, and walked and sometimes drove about the place, but a week passed and he saw nothing more of the pretty face that had struck his somewhat fickle fancy. Then, one day his mother took the children out with her in the carriage, as she intended paying a visit to their grand-aunt Miss Gifford; an old lady, the sister of the first Lord, and who, as she was very rich, naturally expected her relations to be attentive to her.

She lived in the house where her brother, Sir Thomas Gifford, the great brewer, had lived before he built Wrothslley. This place was named Gateford Manor House, and stood almost in sight of the famous breweries, which had made the fortunes of the family. But this lady was not like her nephew, the second Lord, for she was not ashamed of the breweries, and was full of jokes and waggeries at people quarrelling as she called it, with their bread and butter. She also prided herself on speaking her mind, and she and Lady Gilmore had never been on very amiable terms. Nevertheless her great wealth, and great age, made her a person no family could afford to slight. Lady Gilmore, therefore, for the sake of her children, put up with the old lady's sharp words as best she could, and took her little girls to see their great-aunt, and instructed them not to make any personal remarks on her somewhat—to their youthful eyes—quaint appearance.

She did not ask Miss Loftus to accompany them, and

thus Nancy had the prospect of a whole afternoon to herself ; but Gilmore, who knew they were going, had made up his mind, when he heard his mother planning the visit, to seize this opportunity of making the acquaintance of the handome governess.

He knew it was but folly to do so, but when Gilmore took a whim he always sought to gratify it. And this whim was a strong one, for no sooner had he seen his mother and the children drive away than he began to consider how it would be easiest and safest to see Miss Loftus. He thought of again going down the armory, but then if she was not there, what excuse could he make for entering the schoolroom? He was still debating this question, when, as he stood by one of the windows, he saw a slender, girlish figure in black, pass down the terrace below, and descend the flight of marble steps and enter the park, and begin to cross it by one of the side paths.

Here was his opportunity! As fast then as his still languid footsteps could carry him, he followed Nancy, but to his dismay—for he was too weak to go far—Nancy went on and on, until it was all he could do to keep her in sight. It was a fine, bright, cold, winter day, and Nancy was enjoying her walk, perfectly unconscious that her movements were of any interest to anyone. But at the West Lodge gate she turned, and began retracing her footsteps, and a quarter of an hour later she suddenly perceived the figure of the young Lord advancing towards her.

She knew at once who it was, though she had never before actually seen Gilmore's face, but had just caught a glimpse of him the day the children were waving their handkerchiefs to him from the school-room windows. But the tall slender form, the arm in the sling, and the general bearing made her sure it was Lord Gilmore ; and she was about to pass him without raising her eyes, when Gilmore stopped directly in front of her, and lifted his gray-cloth cap from his handsome head, addressed her with a smile.

"I am sure, he said, "that I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Loftus ; and I am sure also that my little sisters have often talked to you of a certain graceless brother of theirs."

Nancy blushed and bowed.

"You are Lord Gilmore?" she said.

"I am that unfortunate person," answered Gilmore still smiling, "and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance:"

"Are you better?" asked Nancy half-timidly; and for a moment she looked up at the good-looking, smiling face before her.

"I am better, but still most abominably weak and shaky; you were not here, were you, when that stray shot nearly ended my useless existence?"

"No, I came very soon after though."

"May I turn with you, it's too cold to stand?" said Gilmore the next moment, and then without waiting for any permission he did join Nancy, and commenced walking by her side. "Shall I tell you how I first heard of you—from Sir John Oakes;" and Gilmore gave a little laugh.

"I met him at Lady Blenkinsop's."

"So he told me, but I cannot possibly tell you all he said about you; he made me very curious, I assure you."

Nancy made no answer to this.

"He's a nice enough boy," went on Gilmore carelessly, "his place is not very far from here, you know, and he has lately joined a cavalry regiment, and seems very proud of his embroidered jacket."

"I thought he seemed very good-natured."

"I dare say; his brains are not of an excitable or of so large an order as to prove burdensome I should think. What do you say?"

Nancy smiled.

"I saw so little of him, I could not judge," she answered.

"Yet in that short time," went on Gilmore, also smiling, "you made an impression on his youthful heart, never to be effaced, he informed me."

"What nonsense."

"He at all events did not seem to think so; but let us talk of something more interesting than John Oakes—tell me something about yourself, and have you not nearly died already of dullness in the schoolroom, where the hours of my innocent childhood were so happily spent?"

Nancy gave a little laugh.

"I found it rather quiet at first," she said, "because I was accustomed to see more people at home, but I get on very well with my little pupils."

And yet of all the opinionative little monkeys I ever came across, that child Dossy is the worst. She airs her ideas like a woman of thirty."

"She is sometimes very amusing."

"They must bore you awfully I should think?"

"Oh, no, they don't."

"My mother has taken them to-day to pay court to a terrible old relation of ours, whose money-bags are her only attraction—a Miss Gifford, who has the honor to be my grand-aunt."

"They told me they were going—but Lord Gilmore, I think I must say good-morning now."

"Why?" asked Gilmore, turning round and looking at her.

"I think it is time for me to go in."

Gilmore took out his watch.

"The mother and the chicks," he said, "cannot be back for two hours yet, so won't you take compassion on me a little longer, Miss Loftus? Have you ever seen over the place? Seen the conservatories?"

"No," hesitated Nancy; "but I think——"

"Do come and see them now then. I dare say, like all young ladies, you are fond of a posie?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!"

"Then come and I will gather you one, if you will honor me by accepting it?"

Nancy felt this was too tempting an offer to be refused. She blushed and smiled, and forgot for the moment all the excellent advice of Lady Blenkinsop, and her awe of Lady Gilmore. She went with the young Lord to the gardens, which were of immense extent, and finally to the lofty conservatory which occupied a central position in a long range of well-stocked forcing houses, of which there were over twenty.

"Oh! how beautiful!" cried Nancy, looking round at the glowing children of every clime, all here blooming in rich luxuriance.

One of the head gardeners came up to them, hat-in-hand at this moment, but with a little haughty nod, Gilmore dismissed him.

"I hate to be bored by those sort of fellows," he said to Nancy; "We did not come here to talk to the gardeners, did we?"

"I can't talk, I can only admire," smiled Nancy; "I love flowers!"

"Tell me which you like best?"

"I cannot tell!"

Gilmore was amused at her rapture; he kept looking from time to time at her blooming face, thinking it was fairer than any flower around them, and that she had a charm, a beauty that would kindle admiration in the heart of an anchorite.

"The little witch," he thought, and he smiled softly to himself. All the while, however, he went on cutting a posie for Nancy, choosing the rarest and most beautiful blossoms.

"This is not a bad place to walk in on a winter afternoon," he said presently. "Will you come here again, Miss Loftus?"

"I—do not know," answered Nancy, casting down her eyes.

"But promise?" went on Gilmore, looking smilingly at her blushing face.

"I should like to do so very much—but you know now——"

"Well, what do I know?"

"I—am always forgetting that I am a governess, I am afraid," said poor Nancy.

"Please continue to forget it, as you are perfectly unlike one; a governess to my mind should be a middle-aged woman, of angular form, a rigid countenance and wear spectacles—not a lovely girl—but do not think me rude?"

"I might wear spectacles," said Nancy with a soft little laugh, and for a moment she raised her bright shining dark eyes to Gilmore's face.

"So you might," he answered laughing also, "but will you take them off please when you talk to me?"

"I must not talk to you any more, Lord Gilmore."

"Oh! yes, you must, you must! Not talk to me indeed—if I thought you would be so unkind I should do something desperate."

Nancy suddenly began to feel very uncomfortable, and a dim shadow of Lady Blenkinsop rose before her mental vision.

"I really must go in now," she said.

"Because you think I am talking nonsense? It's only my way, Miss Loftus, and you must not be angry."

"But it is getting late."

"Oh, no, it is not ; let us go into the palm house, and walk under the shadow of their big leaves."

And Nancy went, and beneath the green shade of lofty palms, and huge banana trees, Nancy found herself talking to Gilmore of her life in India, and telling him of the beauties and splendors of that wondrous land.

"And now my poor father's grave is there," she added with simple pathos, and Gilmore watching her saw in an instant her eyes grow dim.

"It was very sad," he said with ready sympathy.

"It was more than that : we were looking forward so to his coming home—and it nearly killed my mother."

"You must not talk of it," for Gilmore liked not sad subjects ; "we must try to make your life a little brighter here."

All this time he was carrying the gorgeous flowers he had gathered for her, and presently when Nancy perceived the increasing gloom outside, she insisted on returning to the Castle, and after urging her more than once to remain a little longer, Gilmore was forced to submit, and presently the two young people were passing down the dim walks of the dusky gardens, for the winter twilight had already stolen around them.

At length they reached one of the entrances, and Nancy stopped.

"I must say good-evening here," she said.

Gilmore held out his hand.

"Will you make me one promise before you go?" he asked.

"You must tell me what it is?"

"That I shall see you sometimes? I shall not soon forget the pleasant afternoon I have spent."

"Well, perhaps—sometimes," answered Nancy, pulling her hand from his ; and then excited, flushed, and with a vague consciousness that she had been doing something wrong, she hurried to her own part of the great house, and when she reached the schoolroom sat down there, breathless, but feeling happier than she had ever done at Wrothsley.

And her flowers, what was she to do with them? Nancy now asked herself. They were sure to attract the children's attention if she left them in the schoolroom, and the maidservants if she took them to her own room. At last she carried them thither, but could not resist plac-

ing a lovely rose-bud close to her shapely throat. And on Miss Dossy's return, she instantly observed this.

"What a splendid blossom," remarked Dossy, in her old-fashioned way. "Where did you get it, Miss Loftus?"

"I have been through the conservatories," answered Nancy with a guilty blush.

"And one of the gardeners gave it to you? I am glad he did, for they are very mean about their flowers."

Nancy allowed this to pass, and then Dossy, echoed by Flossy, began to tell of their visit to Gateford Manor House.

"She is an immensely old lady you know, our grandfather's sister, and she says such funny things, mother sent us out of the room that we might not hear."

"The funny things" that Miss Gifford had been saying to Lady Gilmore, had in the meantime put that lady into a state of extreme agitation and alarm. Lady Gilmore had not seen her husband's aunt since Gilmore's "accident," as his wound was generally called at Wrothsley, and scarcely had she been five minutes at the Manor House, before Miss Gifford began on the subject.

"Well, my Lady," said the old woman fixing her bleared eyes on Lady Gilmore's sallow face, and calling her "My Lady," with a touch of derision on her ancient tongue, "so you've had fine doings at Wrothsley since I saw you."

"You mean about Gilmore's dreadful accident?"

"Accident?" sharply replied the old spinster, "I'm told it was no accident; that some woman had a finger in the pie."

"Go out of the room into the gardens, Dossy and Flossy," said Lady Gilmore to her little girls, with suppressed emotion, and when they obeyed her, she turned to Miss Gifford in some excitement——

"You should not say such things before the children," she said, in an agitated voice; "it—is mere gossip—Gilmore was shot by accident, I believe by some poacher."

"A poacher with a petticoat then I am told," chuckled the old lady. "There are fine stories afloat about it, I can tell you; they say some woman shot Gilmore in a jealous rage, and then shot herself. Ay, ay, he's just like his father—always after the women,"

"I—I—cannot sit and listen to this!" said Lady Gilmore, rising excitedly.

"It's true enough for all that," went on old Miss Gifford ruthlessly, "it's in the blood, even Thomas the old man couldn't pass a pretty girl without turning to look after her, and we all know what your husband was, and this young fellow is the same, I suppose. You should get him married, my Lady, there are plenty of handsome girls without money, who would take him for his."

Every word of this speech was a fresh stab into the heart of the wayward, passionate, and loving woman who listened to it, and the old dame who spoke it from her toothless jaws was quite aware of this, and relished in her grim way the pain she was inflicting.

There she sat, wrinkled, aged and infirm, but hard and bitter still. She had sprung from a different class to the high-born Dorothy Vaux, who had married her nephew, and remembered when Thomas Gifford her brother had started his first brewery with great pride and uplifting of heart. And she knew the lady before her had been ashamed of the breweries, though she partook of the wealth they had brought, and therefore Miss Gifford enjoyed reminding Lady Gilmore of things she would fain have forgotten.

"Yes, you should get him married," she repeated again presently, and these words from the grand-aunt were still ringing in Lady Gilmore's ears when she returned to Wrothsley, after her very unpleasant visit to Gateford Manor House.

"Perhaps she is right," thought the anxious, restless mother of the young man, who at this moment, was sitting smoking and smiling softly to himself, when he thought of the pretty girl with whom he had lately wandered beneath the palms.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MOTHER'S CHOICE.

LADY GILMORE thought more and more during the next few days of the grand-aunt's advice about getting a wife for her son, and cast anxiously over in her mind the attractions of the different girls he would be likely to admire.

She knew he loved beauty, therefore a pretty or handsome face was essential. There was a Lady Mabel Bute, that at one time she had hoped Gilmore would fall in love with, a haughty, young, lovely girl, the daughter of a Duke, and so even in Lady Gilmore's eyes almost worthy of her son. But if there really had risen any scandal about Gilmore, and Lady Gilmore knew the grand-aunt too well to believe she would invent one, for the old lady had a sharp but truthful tongue, would Lady Mabel with her high rank and large fortune be allowed by her parents to marry him?

Lady Gilmore debated this question again and again in her mind, and then bethought her of a pretty, bright young girl, who had been presented during the last season, and greatly admired. She was the Hon. Kate Butler, the daughter of a poor Irish Viscount, and her youth and beauty were supposed to be all the possessions she would bring to her husband. Lady Gilmore had heard her son praise Miss Butler's good-looks, and had seen Miss Butler's bright, sparkling, Irish blue eyes light up with pleasure when Gilmore was talking to her; and as she came of an ancient, noble, though impoverished family, Lady Gilmore at last decided that if she could arrange it, Miss Butler would be a suitable wife for her son.

And there was no time like the present, she decided also. Gilmore was now weak and languid, and a bright lively girl would help to cheer him, and have a hundred more chances of gaining his love when he had nothing else to amuse him, than she would have in town; and therefore Lady Gilmore determined forthwith to invite Miss Butler to stay at Wrothsley, and she had little doubt that Miss Butler would only be too delighted to come.

She did not confide her intentions to Gilmore; she knew too well if he supposed she were scheming to bring about the match, that it would entirely set his mind against it. And Miss Kate Butler had also another attraction, and a great one in her eyes. She was of her own creed, and came like herself of an old Roman Catholic family, and as Gilmore was utterly careless on such subjects, she knew this would be a matter of indifference to him.

She therefore wrote a letter to this young lady's mother, whom she knew fairly well, asking her if she would allow her pretty daughter to come to Wrothsley on a visit of a week or two,

"It will be the greatest possible kindness if she will do so," continued Lady Gilmore, "for we are not receiving anyone at present, on account of the terrible accident, of which you may have heard, that befell poor Gilmore. He was accidentally shot in one of the thickets in the park, by poachers, and found by two of the keepers in a state that I dare not think of. He is now much better, however, and can move about the house a little, but still has to be very quiet. Thus, though I fear it will be dull for Kate, it would be a charity if she would come to cheer us up a little, with her lively charming ways, and I am sure Gilmore would be delighted to see her," and so on.

The lady to whom this letter was addressed was a shrewd woman, and she at once guessed why it was written. Lady Lisburn knew there had been a scandal about Gilmore, but she knew also that they were poor, and that her pretty daughter would have no fortune, and that her eldest son was extravagant, and her lord terribly pinched, and that Gilmore was very rich.

"His mother wishes him to settle, I suppose," she mused, and she also wished her handsome sprightly Kate to settle, and she knew Kate liked Gilmore, and had always been very pleased at any attentions from the good-looking young lord.

She did not confide her thoughts to Lord Lisburn, for they were never on very amiable terms, as there was constant trouble about money between them, but she partly did to her daughter Kate, and the quick girl instantly understood.

"Here is a letter from Lady Gilmore," she said to Miss Butler, "and she wishes you to go and stay at Wrothsley for a week or two—to enliven Gilmore, I suppose, after his accident," she added with a smile.

"Poor fellow, is he better?" answered the girl with a quick blush.

She was a tall, slender young woman this, with regular features, bright dark blue eyes with dark brown lashes, brows and hair, and a clear, indeed brilliant, complexion. Her movements were quick and the expression of her face ever changeful, and there was a certain impatience sometimes in her manner; in the way she threw back her head which reminded you of what her father called her mother's "confounded tempers," for Lady Lisburn and

her lord rarely passed a day together without some sharp, nay, bitter words being exchanged between them.

"Would you like to go?" continued Lady Lisburn, looking at her daughter.

"May I see the letter?" said Miss Butler.

Lady Lisburn put it into her hand, and as Miss Butler read it, her color deepened.

"Yes, I think I should," she added, after she had read it; "it must be dreadfully dull for poor Gilmore—I could go from the Cadogans' there, mother, couldn't I?"

"So you could, my dear, that will be a very good arrangement, and you are due at the Cadogan's in the middle of next week? Shall I write and tell Lady Gilmore that you will be able to be with her in about a fortnight?"

The mother and daughter settled it thus, and they both quite understood what this visit meant, for it was well-known that Lady Gilmore watched over her son with the most jealous care, and was very unlikely to invite a handsome young girl under her roof while Gilmore was an invalid, unless she had some motive for it.

But scarcely was Lady Gilmore's invitation duly accepted, when she began to be afraid that she had been rash in sending it. Would Gilmore be angry? she reflected; and did she know enough of Kate Butler to justify her in throwing her son into such intimate acquaintance with her? And would the Lisburns perhaps expect that he intended to propose to Kate, when he had not got the slightest idea of the whole scheme?

These doubts and fears tormented the anxious mother incessantly during the first few days after she received Lady Lisburn's reply, and when a week later, she mentioned to her son that she had had a letter from Lady Lisburn, and that Kate was coming on to them after she ended her visit to the Cadogan's, an annoyed expression at once passed over his face.

"What a bore," he said, "cannot you put her off mother; I really am not strong enough to be expected to make myself agreeable to Kate Butler?"

"I thought you admired her, Gilmore?"

"So I do in a way, she's a pretty girl, but too excessively lively for me at present, please make some excuse not to have her."

Here was a pretty dilemma for Lady Gilmore to find

herself in. She had invited the Hon. Kate especially to enliven Gilmore, and Gilmore did not appreciate it, and asked for the very young lady to be put off whom she had hoped he would marry!

"My dear, I cannot refuse to have her for a day or two," she said, with a troubled heart, "for I have already written to Lady Lisburn to tell her so."

"It's a nuisance," answered Gilmore crossly, and then he turned away, thinking that Miss Kate Butler would be very much in the way at present.

The truth was that since the day Gilmore had met Nancy Loftus in the park, and walked with her beneath the spreading palms, he had never for a moment been able to get her sweet face out of his mind. And she had also piqued him by avoiding him, or at least not going to meet him as he asked her. He had spoken to her twice since, but this was only after a great deal of trouble on his part, and Gilmore was not used in his love affairs to give himself much trouble.

Their two meetings had happened thus. Lady Gilmore had directed Nancy to take the children out each fine or tolerable morning for a walk in the park at twelve o'clock, before their early dinner, and Nancy had obeyed. It chanced to be a very fine winter morning the day after Nancy had first talked to Gilmore, the sun bright, the hoar-frost hiding the pinched grass, and shining on the branches of the great trees, and fringing the leaves of the evergreens with white. A glorious morning, that sent young blood dancing in the veins, and made blooming cheeks more beautiful, and bright eyes more bright, and Nancy feeling light-hearted and exhilarated, went walking swiftly on between her two young pupils, with one of Gilmore's roses nestling in the boa round her throat.

"Is that the rose you wore last night, Miss Loftus?" inquired curious Miss Dossy.

"Why do you ask?" answered Nancy, with a little laugh.

"Because it struck me it was not, you must be quite a favorite with Johnson, the head-gardener, if he gives you roses like that, as he is a great screw."

Again Nancy laughed, and then suddenly blushed, for she perceived at this moment, Gilmore on one of the cross walks from the main-road, now coming towards them. The children at the same instant also saw him, and proclaimed the news with cries of joy.

“Look, Miss Loftus ! there is Gilmore—there, under the trees— we must run to him.”

They suited their actions to their words, and at once darted off to meet Gilmore, who accompanied by them a few minutes later approached the spot where Nancy stood, scarcely knowing what to do.

But Dossy solved the question.

“This is our governess, Miss Loftus, Gilmore,” she said ; and Gilmore smilingly raised his cap, and looked more smilingly still at Nancy’s blooming lovely face.

“It’s a splendid morning,” he said ; “and so you young ladies are having a walk?”

“Yes,” faltered Nancy in some confusion, “Lady Gilmore wishes them to go out each morning.”

“Quite right ; do you never go down the avenue to the lake.”

“Oh, let us go there to day, Gilmore,” cried both the little girls in one breath, “it is so lovely to see the water-fowl, and the little islands—do let us go, Miss Loftus?”

“Is it not too far?” asked Nancy, for the park was a great place, and extended over an area of quite fourteen miles in circumference, and in the summer-time was beautiful with its green and varied slopes, its lake, and magnificent trees, beneath which the dappled deer browsed and the wild birds sang. Sir Thomas Gifford when he bought Wrothsley, had pulled down the old Hall that stood amid its woods and wilds, and had reared the stately pile he considered suitable to his new state.

And he had spared neither money nor care on the great Elizabethan mansion that he built. It’s well-balanced masses, and the magnificence of its details made it a show house in the county, and the old man had been proud of it, and was never weary of pointing out its beauties to friends that he had known in humbler days, and would boast of the vast sums that the pictures alone had cost him, and beautiful statuary, marble mantel-pieces and the Aubuseen tapestry.

The lake was a lovely spot, quite a mile-and-a-half from the house, and Nancy had never seen it, but urged now by Gilmore to comply with the children’s request, she consented to go. Presently the little girls ran on, and she was virtually alone with Gilmore.

“Do you know I have watched and waited over an hour this morning to see you,” he said, when the children were out of hearing.

Nancy felt greatly embarrassed by this speech, for more than once during the morning she had taken herself to task, and had told herself it would never do for her to be seen walking with the young Lord.

"You promised to talk to me sometimes, you know, before you ran away yesterday," continued Gilmore, "so you will forgive me watching for you, won't you?"

"I hope you won't do so anymore, Lord Gilmore," said Nancy nervously; "You see Lady Gilmore would not like it—it will only bring me trouble."

"I have thought of that too," answered Gilmore, "for women are so absurd about some things, and my mother has a very jealous and exacting nature, but still we could meet, you know, on the quiet?"

"I could not do that," said Nancy, raising her head a little proudly.

"Do not misunderstand me, please; I only meant that to avoid the confounded gossip and talk, that some people will make about nothing, we could arrange some place where we could see each other, and have a pleasant chat like we had yesterday. It must be horribly dull for a young girl like you to be shut up in a schoolroom all day with two children."

"Governesses are not supposed to lead gay lives, you know," replied Nancy a little archly.

"That is all nonsense; it is a pleasure to me to talk to you, and unless you dislike it——"

Nancy's deepening blush was her only answer, and as Gilmore turned to look at her, he caught a glimpse of the rosebud nestling by her throat.

"At least you honor me by wearing my poor flowers," he said, well-pleased.

"But even that has nearly got me into trouble already," said Nancy smiling; "Miss Dossy immediately inquired if one of the gardeners had given it to me."

"Tiresome monkey!"

"So you see, Lord Gilmore——"

"I don't see it at all. Will you come down to the conservatories again this afternoon?"

"Certainly not."

"To-morrow, then?"

"No, indeed."

"Ah, Miss Loftus, don't be so hard. What possible harm could there be in your walking with me for half an hour?"

"No harm, but as I said before, Lady Gilmore would not like it."

"But I would like it. I want to be friends with you; I feel almost as if we were friends already."

"Yet I have only spoken to you once," said Nancy shyly.

"What matter is that? I know when I like people the first time I speak to them, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I do," answered Nancy, still more shyly.

"Then don't tell me you hate me, please. Ah, here are the tiresome brats again!"

Dossy and Flossy now rejoined them, and Gilmore tried in vain to shake them off. Dossy related to her brother how their great-aunt had said such "funny things" the afternoon before, that "mother" had sent them out of the room.

"I believe they were about you, Gilmore," she added, raising her blue eyes to his face. "It was about your accident she was talking, and she said she had heard some woman had a finger in the pie."

A scarlet flush instantly rose to Gilmore's face.

"What folly!" he said hastily and angrily. "What a fool that old woman is, to be sure!"

"And she made mother as cross as two sticks," continued Dossy; "altogether we had a bad time of it, and Miss Loftus was far better off. She went over the conservatories when we were away, and Johnson the gardener gave her two of his best roses."

Nancy could not help laughing at this, and a moment later Gilmore laughed too. But there was a frown on his brow still, and after they reached the lake he parted with them. But before he did so he had a word to whisper to Nancy which the sharp Dossy did not hear, as she was taken up at this moment in watching some water-fowl on one of the little islands on the lake.

"Please come down to the conservatories to-morrow at four," said Gilmore in a low tone, "I've something to tell you;" and the next moment, before Nancy could reply, he had taken off his cap and left them.

"Why has Gilmore gone away?" asked Dossy looking around.

"He is tired, I suppose," answered Nancy, and she stood thoughtfully for a few minutes looking at the lake,

and at the water pouring down over the rocks at its side and forming numerous mimic cascades which sparkled in the sun.

"I must not go," the girl was thinking; "no, I must not go."

And she did not go to meet Gilmore on the following afternoon, and as he went to meet her, and lingered until nearly six o'clock, before he returned to the house, he went back both angry and disappointed. And in vain also he waited for Nancy and her pupils on the two following mornings. One was wet and they did not go out, and the other somehow Gilmore missed them. Nancy was afraid, indeed, to meet him again, and avoided going on the walks where they had twice met. But the day before his mother told him of her invitation to Miss Butler, he did accidentally encounter them, and seized a moment when he thought Dossy was not listening to reproach Nancy for disappointing him.

"What have I done that you should treat me so?" he asked. "I waited for you two hours that afternoon in the conservatories."

"Indeed, Lord Gilmore, I cannot meet you," answered Nancy with a deep blush.

"What are you saying, Gilmore, that makes Miss Loftus' face turn so red?" now inquired Miss Dossy inquisitively.

"Don't be rude, Dossy," said Gilmore with some anger in his tone.

"I must say good-morning; we are going in," said Nancy, and as they were within sight of the house, Gilmore thought it more prudent to take off his cap and turn away.

But as he went along one of the glades of the park, he was still thinking of Nancy Loftus.

"Ah, my little beauty," he thought, "you may be as cold to me as you like now, but the day will come when you will not be—yes, I swear it."

CHAPTER X.

THE SON'S CHOICE.

THUS Gilmore thought that the arrival of Miss Butler at Wrothsley at the present time would be very inconvenient, and so he had asked his mother to put her off. He wanted to see Nancy, and he was determined to see her, and he felt that Miss Butler's presence might make it more difficult. But for once Lady Gilmore was firm, and held out against her son's will. She thought indeed, that it was impossible for her to make an excuse to Lady Lisburn, and so she told Gilmore to his great annoyance.

"It will only be for a few days you know, my dearest, and I am sure Kate Butler is such a charming girl she will help to amuse you," said Lady Gilmore, not speaking the exact truth about the time she meant Miss Butler's visit to continue.

Gilmore gave an expressive gesture of disapproval, for he thought of another amusement on which his mind was bent, and therefore he did not wish to be troubled with Miss Butler. But Lady Gilmore kept to her purpose, and Miss Butler arrived at Wrothsley on the day which had originally been fixed.

But in the meanwhile Gilmore had succeeded in obtaining another interview with Nancy, which in a way was one momentous to them both. And, strange to tell, the grim old woman at Gateford Manor House was the person of all others who helped him to obtain his heart's desire. Miss Gifford, though she never did, nor never cared to keep her bitter tongue quiet, was by no means indifferent to family ties, and therefore wrote one day at this time, to invite Dossy and Flossy to spend a day with her; and Lady Gilmore, however incensed and hurt she might be at the grand-aunt's remarks, thought it but prudent to let them go.

And Dossy and Flossy had been in Gilmore's way all this time! It could not be supposed that when he was so anxious to see Nancy Loftus, that he had forgotten the corridor where he had played as a boy, and where he had first seen her sweet face. He had thought of it, indeed,

many times, and no scruples that it was not quite fair to the young governess to enter it, had caused him to forbear doing so. Gilmore, in fact, was not scrupulous, but he was afraid of his little sisters' prattling tongues. Well knowing that if it came to his mother's ears that he frequented the corridor, which had always been given up to the children of the family and their governesses, that the present governess—if she were supposed to be the attraction—would have a very brief sojourn beneath the roof.

He had locked away the key of the door which opened on the staircase that led to it, and been amused one day by hearing two of the housemaids shaking the door, and declaring the key must be lost. But they settled it was no matter, as the staircase was never used. "We can brush it down from the other side," they said, "when we do the armory and the rooms there." Thus Gilmore had his key all safely in his own possession, and the afternoon that Dossy and Flossy went to Gateford, he determined to use it.

"I am going to have a smoke, and then to lie down," he said to his mother after lunch, "it's too cold to go out."

"Then I'll drive over for the children," answered Lady Gilmore, who felt he was tired of her company, and as the children had gone in the morning to their great-aunt's she thought by this time she would consider she had had enough of them.

Gilmore having thus secured an afternoon to himself, was determined not to waste it, and very soon found his way to the door of which he alone held the key, and having opened it, re-locked it from the other side, and then descended the staircase, and speedily found himself in the long corridor, known as the armory at Wrothsley.

He went slowly down this, wondering what excuse he could make for rapping at the schoolroom door when he reached it, but as he walked on he perceived this would be unnecessary, for before him, her back turned to him, her arms flung carelessly back also, and her hands clasped behind her, was Nancy Loftus herself, singing in a low undertone as she went on.

Gilmore quickened his footsteps, and a moment later the girl heard them, and turned swiftly round. A flush rose at once to the clear skin, and she gave a little start when she saw who it was, and then she smiled.

"I hope I did not startle you?" said Gilmore. "But I

came here to look at some of this old armor, and I am happy to have met you."

"I often walk up and down here," answered Nancy.

"And those little plagues are not here to bother you to-day?"

"No, they have gone to their grand-aunt's."

"So I was delighted to hear, and ever since I did hear it—shall I make a confession, Miss Loftus?"

"If it pleases you," smiled Nancy.

"Well, ever since I heard it then I have been planning on what excuse I could see you—and I found one in the old armor you perceive." And Gilmore laughed as he pointed to the walls.

Nancy looked grave for a moment, and then she laughed softly too.

"Do not be angry with me?" said Gilmore.

"I think I ought to be."

"No, please do not; I have wanted to see you every day, you know, since we talked together under the palm leaves."

"But we cannot see each other every day, Lord Gilmore."

"I wish we could, that is all I can say, most earnestly wish it."

Nancy did not speak for a moment.

"And now at least, when we have the chance, you will not send me away, will you? My mother has gone to Gateford to fetch the children home, and we have the afternoon to ourselves, may I stay with you!"

Nancy hesitated, blushed, and Gilmore could see that his request had slightly agitated her.

"Let us walk up and down here," he went on, "and talk of all sorts of things. By-the-bye, I am going to be bored out of my life, d'ye know?"

"And how is that?" asked Nancy, with interest, looking at him.

"That good mother of mine has invited a young woman to stay here, yclept Miss Kate Butler, to amuse me forsooth!"

"Well, and is she pretty?" asked Nancy, with curiosity.

"People call her pretty," answered Gilmore, delighted by these signs of interest. "She's a lively, rattling Irish girl, up to all sorts of mischief I should say."

Then she will be a very amusing companion; you won't be dull any longer, Lord Gilmore."

“Oh, won't I! I know who I should rather talk to one short half-hour than to Miss Kate Butler all day.”

“I am quite curious to see this young lady—is she tall or is she little?”

“Tall and straight as a river-reed, she wants a certain softness to my mind—a grace, a charm—that some people possess.”

“And when is she coming?”

“Very soon I believe, in a day or two I think, but I hope she will not stay long.”

“You may change your mind on that subject.”

“I don't think I shall, the very idea bores me—may I come and talk to you sometimes when she is here?”

“No, I am sure you may not, you will not want to talk to me then.”

“But I will indeed—if you knew how I think of no one else——”

“Lord Gilmore, you must not talk thus.”

“Forgive me, but you don't seem to believe me; you do not seem to understand how much I am in earnest.”

“About what?” smiled Nancy a little saucily.

“About my great admiration for you, my eager desire to see more of you.”

“But we really cannot see each other, Lord Gilmore, I—I told you why, you know.”

“Yes, I know you did, but I cannot give it up.”

Nancy was silent for a moment, and then she turned her charming face and looked at him with her soft, shining dark eyes.

“I told you our sad little story, did I not?” she said.

“How my dear father was killed in a moment, and my mother left very, very poor—so poor,” added Nancy with emotion, “that you who are rich cannot understand it—and Lady Blenkinsop who is an old friend of ours, got me this situation here, so that I might be able to assist my mother—and, and—I must not risk my mother's bread.”

Gilmore was moved; moved by the girl's beauty; and by her sweet voice, and the unconscious pathos of her words.

“You make me feel almost a brute!” he said impetuously, “a selfish brute—and yet——”

“I do not wish to make you feel that, for I am sure you are not selfish, but you see I am obliged to think of these things.”

"But it seems so hard—a young girl like you."

"But a young girl who has gone through a lot of trouble," said Nancy with rather a sad smile. "I told you how strange it all seemed to me when I first came here; and when I was at lady Blenkinsop's, just because Sir John Oakes talked to me a little, Lady Blenkinsop gave me quite a lecture, and told me it would never do for me now to speak to young men."

"Lady Blenkinsop is an old fool, begging her pardon and yours for calling her so—to talk such nonsense. Does she think she can make young men blind, and expect them not to admire a lovely face when they see one? But I shall do everything you tell me—I shall never weary nor worry you—if you will tell me one thing?"

"And what is that?"

"If you were not here as the children's governess, would you have cared to talk to me sometimes?"

"That is hardly a fair question."

"Yet I should like you to answer it."

"You mean if I were here as your mother's guest, like the young lady who is coming?"

"Yes, in that case, would you have cared to talk to me?"

"I think I should," answered Nancy, modestly, and sweetly, and with such a charming blush and smile, that Gilmore was completely enraptured.

"I am so glad, so happy," he said eagerly. "Now I shall feel I do not bore you by trying to see you, and I shall not forget what you have told me about your family circumstances, and I shall never expose you to any annoyance,—you can quite trust me?"

"I believe I can."

Thus these young people came to an understanding in the fast gathering gloom of the winter afternoon, and as they walked up and down the long corridor together, poor Nancy almost forgot all Lady Blenkinsop's warning words. As for Gilmore, he felt happy and excited to no ordinary degree. This beautiful girl was not quite indifferent to him then, he was thinking, and the thought was very pleasant to him.

They talked after this, of books, of theatres, of picture-galleries, but the common-place subjects did not seem common-place, nor the time long as the dusky shadows stole around them.

"Have you any decent books to read?" asked Gilmore suddenly.

"I have the school books," answered Nancy smiling, "and I study grammar lest Miss Dossy should ask me any questions, I should feel unable to answer."

"What a shame! I have heaps of novels lying about since my illness, I must lend you some."

"It will really be a great treat to me."

"I am so pleased I thought of it. Shall I go and fetch you some now. Do you see that door there, Miss Loftus, at the end of the corridor?"

"Yes, I see it."

"That leads to a staircase which opens into my part of the house; the door is always kept locked though, but luckily I found the key, therefore I can bring books or flowers, or anything to you without anyone else being the wiser."

"But—" demurred Nancy, as this proposal seemed rather alarming.

"It will be such a pleasure to me," urged Gilmore, and Nancy was not strong-minded enough to refuse.

They parted with the agreement that he was to bring her some books on the following afternoon, and that she was to leave the children in the schoolroom, and go down to the end of the corridor to receive the books.

"Do not quite forget me in the meantime," said Gilmore almost tenderly, and Nancy left him with a beating heart, and a rosy glow on her rounded cheeks.

Yet the flush of excitement died quickly enough out of Gilmore's face after he had returned to his own room, as he sat down to reflect on the interview which had just ended. He knew well enough he was playing a dangerous game, and running certain risks which already had cost him so dear. But he was not one to stop half-way. He had been spoilt from his youth upwards, and everything he had wished for had always been his, and now his coveted toy was this young girl's love.

"Poor little woman," he thought softly, "how pretty she looked when she talked of not risking her mother's bread—well, she won't do that, anyhow, but I'm not going to give her up. I can't, that's the truth; and the other," and Gilmore frowned, "deserves little forbearance from me now."

CHAPTER XI.

A FIRST SUSPICION.

THREE days later the Hon. Kate Butler arrived at Wrothslley, and Lady Gilmore gladly welcomed her. She was a clever, bright-looking girl, and undoubtedly handsome, and she had one fixed purpose in life, of which however she did not speak. She meant to marry well, and she knew that Lord Gilmore was very rich, and that he was also good-looking, and, for the rest, what did it matter? She had been brought up in a bad school, a school of wrangling and bitterness, of poverty and debts, and her heart had not softened in it, but had grown hard and strong.

"I am good-looking," she often told herself, "and I mean not to throw my looks away," and she was not one to lightly change her mind.

She therefore returned Lady Gilmore's greeting with the greatest effusion, and expressed the utmost delight at the prospect of her visit.

"It is so good of you to come," said Lady Gilmore, "when we are so quiet; Gilmore, I am thankful to say, is gathering strength fast, but still his arm pains him very much sometimes—ah, my dear, we have had a dreadful time."

"It must have been too dreadful! I never was so shocked, so horrified; and the wretched man who did it has never been discovered, Lady Gilmore?"

"And never will be, of course; it was a poacher no doubt—and—and my boy might have died!"

Lady Gilmore's dark eyes filled with tears as she said the last words, and Miss Butler caught her hand and pressed it sympathizingly.

"You must not grieve about it, all danger is over now," she said, soothingly.

"Yes, but when I remember my anguish——"

"We felt so much for you, mother and I."

Miss Butler had expressive Irish blue eyes, and she made very good use of them during the interview with Lady Gilmore, who was satisfied, as she looked at her,

that she was a girl with deep feelings and a tender heart.

"Gilmore must admire her," she thought; but before the evening was over neither the keen-witted girl nor the mother were by any means certain of this fact.

Gilmore did not dine with them, for he always took his meals in his own rooms since his illness, as he was still quite unable to use one hand and arm. But at his mother's request he went during the evening into her boudoir, and there saw Miss Butler.

He saw a tall, handsome girl toying with a feather fan, who rose to receive him, and silently clasped his hand, with her blue eyes fixed on his face, as though her heart was too full to speak. "Well, Miss Butler, and how are you?" he said, without any responsive emotion.

"And you?" said Miss Butler in a half-whisper.

"Oh, I'm pulling myself together again all right; so you've been staying with the Cadogan's; any news, there?"

"I think not," said the Hon. Kate, reseating herself, and during the rest of the evening she dropped anything sentimental, and tried to amuse Gilmore with her bright and clever tongue.

But she saw very well that she was not amusing him; that he listened with politeness and laughed at her sallies, but that his bright hazel eyes did not linger on her handsome face. She in fact was a young woman of penetration, and when she retired to bed that night she understood very well that Gilmore had had nothing to do with her invitation to Wrothsley.

"But it is such a splendid place," she thought with a half-sigh; and she decided it were well to remain, and that, perhaps, after all Gilmore might succumb to her attraction.

But the next morning she saw nothing of him until after luncheon time. He wished her to go away in truth, and was quite aware that among marriageable young ladies he was regarded with great favor. Miss Butler, therefore, felt very much chagrined, and found it very dull sitting through a long morning with Lady Gilmore, and to relieve her mind stood for some time gazing out of the windows upon (as it chanced) the snowy park. And presently along the terrace in front of the house she perceived Nancy Loftus and the children passing and repassing on the walks which had been swept.

"There are your children, Lady Gilmore," she said, "and who is that pretty girl walking with them?"

"That is their young governess, Miss Loftus," replied Lady Gilmore.

"She seems a handsome girl."

"She is good-looking; she was recommended by Lady Blenkinsop, the General's wife, you know."

"Ah," answered Miss Butler thoughtfully, and she said nothing more. She was watching the slender girlish figure in black on the terrace below, noting the blooming complexion, and the lithe, light footsteps. Other eyes also were watching that slight form. Gilmore, impatient of restraint, always felt angry when he saw Nancy Loftus and his little sisters that he was bound by his promise to Nancy not to join them, and his fancy grew stronger and stronger for the dark-eyed governess.

After luncheon, he went down to chat with Miss Butler, and at his mother's suggestion walked out with her for half-an-hour on the terrace also in the frosty air. The Hon. Kate was charming and lively as usual, and her laugh rang clear and shrill. She amused Gilmore with society gossip, and bright sayings, but he gave a little shiver when the blast grew stronger, and a faint shower of snow began to fall, and said it was too chill for him to dare to remain out any longer.

"I have to wrap myself up like an old woman, you know, now," he said smiling, "I am always freezing."

"By-and-bye you will be quite well and strong again."

"I hope so, but I do not feel up to much now."

He accompanied her back to his mother's room, and talked to her a little while there, but when Lady Gilmore said she would send for the children to have tea in the boudoir, so that Miss Butler might be introduced to them, Gilmore made an excuse that he was going to smoke, and so again left the two ladies to themselves. But Gilmore was not going to smoke; he had heard his mother request the footman to bring the children to her room, and he meant to seize this opportunity to have another interview with Nancy Loftus.

A quarter of an hour later Nancy heard a light rap at the schoolroom door, as she sat alone there, and when she said "come in," Gilmore's smiling face appeared.

"May I enter?" he asked.

"Oh, no, no," said Nancy, rising in quick alarm, "the

children are only gone for a few minutes, you must not come in here."

"Come and walk in the corridor then for a little while, it seems an age since I saw you last."

Nancy went to the schoolroom door, and as she stood a moment there, he took her hand, and drew her gently into the corridor.

"Let us go to the other end," he said in a low tone, "and when they come back we shall hear them, and I can escape by the staircase."

"But this is wrong, I am sure it is wrong," half-whispered Nancy, who felt afraid.

"Yes, wrong that we can't walk and talk openly together—not wrong that I should wish to see you."

"And Miss Butler—I saw you walking on the terrace with her this morning?"

"Yes, I have just come in from a duty walk that my mother forced upon me, but all the time I was wishing I was here, and when she sent for the children I made an excuse, and here I am, you see."

"Miss Butler seems very handsome?"

"She's a fine showy sort of a girl, and oh, doesn't she talk."

"Well, do you mean?"

"Rather amusingly, but I felt intensely bored, as all the time I was wishing to be with you."

It must be admitted that these words were very pleasant to Nancy's ears. She liked Gilmore, and felt naturally flattered that he so greatly admired her. Yet she always felt half-guilty when she was talking to him, and when she had met him at the end of the corridor to receive the books he had promised her, she had told him that she really dare not do so again.

But Gilmore would not listen.

"Did you shut the children into the schoolroom?" he asked.

"Yes, but I cannot tell they will stay there, you know."

"But surely you can have a few moments to yourself—a few moments for me?"

"But just think, Lord Gilmore—"

"Will you not risk something for my sake? I know I would risk much for yours."

Nancy's heart beat very fast at these words, and though she only stayed a few minutes with Gilmore, she admitted

to herself when she reached her own bedroom, carrying the packet of books that he had brought her, that these stolen interviews were very sweet. Yet the next morning she felt very repentant, for the post brought her a long and loving letter from her dear mother.

Mrs. Loftus had felt Nancy's loss at home even more keenly than she had expected. And they had had sickness in the little house, for Mrs. Barclay (Aunt Fannie) had been seized with so severe an attack of bronchitis, that she had never been able to leave her sister-in-law, and had felt so alarmed about her own health, that she was afraid to go abroad alone, according to her usual custom in the winter.

All this home news—the little struggles and trials—seemed a sort of reproach to Nancy, when she reflected that she was certainly risking her chance of helping her mother by her imprudence in meeting Lord Gilmore. Still she was but a girl. And her life at Wrothsley had certainly been a very dull one, before her acquaintance with Gilmore commenced. But she made up her mind to be very careful, and Gilmore did not see her for two days; not until his mother sent for the children to have tea with Miss Butler and herself, and Nancy had felt these two days very dreary and long.

So when Gilmore rapped at the schoolroom door, and drew her into the corridor, in her heart she was by no means unwilling to go. They went to the furthest end of the corridor, and stood leaning against the staircase door, while Gilmore was supposed to be smoking in his own rooms, and Miss Butler was fuming at his absence, all the while that she was smiling and talking to Lady Gilmore and the children.

And of what were the two in the dimly-lighted corridor talking? Was it of the old, old story of youth and love and hope? Not yet. They stood there looking in each other's faces, and smiling and saying light foolish words. Such a short while ago strangers, but now they felt warm friends, and were glad to meet, and loath to part.

"I am going to town for a day or two," Gilmore told her, "I must go, for I want to see about some business, and to tell the truth also I want to keep out of Miss Butler's way—and I want you to promise me something before I go?"

"I can make no rash promises," smiled Nancy.

"But this is not a rash one."

"I must hear it first."

"Will you promise then to come and walk here every afternoon at this time when I am away, and promise, too, to come on the day I return?"

"How shall I know the day you return?"

"I shall write and let you know if I may."

"And how long will you be away?"

"A week, not longer—and I am going to-morrow. I mean to get a telegram to-morrow morning to call me to town and away from the attractions of Miss Butler." And Gilmore laughed softly.

"Are you afraid of them?"

"I am afraid of her prying eyes and sharp tongue—and besides, I want to bring you something from town."

"Oh, no, I want nothing."

"Don't refuse to give me a small pleasure. Well, will you come here every day then, when I am away?"

"Why do you wish this?" said Nancy, in a low tone, casting down her shining dark eyes.

"Can't you guess? Ah, you do! I wish it because I want you to think of me; to know that I am thinking of you—every moment, every hour."

Nancy gave a little saucy shake of her pretty head.

"Don't you believe this?" went on Gilmore, quite earnestly; and he tried to take her hand, but Nancy shyly drew it away. "'Tis true I swear; I shall see a lovely face—as I see it now—always before me."

Nancy glanced up archly.

"Do you say these pretty things to Miss Butler?" she said.

"No, I don't," answered Gilmore, half-angrily; for he was unused to find his love-making not met more than half-way. "I say to no one what I say to you."

Nancy laughed softly; she did not quite believe all his words, yet she was pleased to listen to them, and naturally flattered by the attentions of this good-looking man, of so much higher social position than her own, and Nancy was by no means indifferent to such vanities.

"Then," she said smilingly, "I have to walk up and down here every afternoon in the cold, for a week?"

"Will you Nancy? say you will?" answered Gilmore eagerly, again trying to take her hand, for his ill-nature had vanished as quickly as it came. But at this moment

the voices of the children were to be heard at the other end of the corridor, and with an impatient gesture, Gilmore silently pressed Nancy's hand, and then quietly opened the door which led to the staircase, disappeared behind it, and Nancy was once more alone.

She waited a moment and then walked forward to meet the children, who could talk of nothing but Miss Butler.

"She's such a pretty young lady, taller than you are, Miss Loftus," they told her.

"She has Irish blue eyes," said Dossy.

"Quite blue," echoed Flossy; and during the rest of the day, Nancy heard of little else; and as Gilmore spent part of the evening in the company of his mother and her guest, "the pretty young lady" retired to bed in a more hopeful condition of mind, regarding the owner of Wrothsley.

But the next morning all her fond hopes were dashed to the ground. About eleven o'clock, which was earlier than he generally appeared, Gilmore entered his mother's room, dressed for travelling, and to his mother's consternation, announced he was on the point of starting for town.

"You are not fit to go, Gilmore," cried Lady Gilmore starting to her feet.

"It is a necessity, mother, so I must be fit," he answered briefly; and Lady Gilmore sank back in her chair pale and trembling, for she remembered at this moment the mysterious letter that Gilmore had received on his sick-bed, and the grand-aunt's warning.

"I am sorry to be obliged to leave when you are here," continued Gilmore courteously, turning to Miss Butler, whose fine complexion had suddenly paled; "but it is unavoidable."

"I am very sorry," answered Miss Butler in a strained tone.

"But how long will you be away? surely not many days?" asked Lady Gilmore eagerly.

"Only a few days I expect."

"Then Kate will be with us still when you return I hope," said his mother.

"I hope so too," smiled Gilmore, and then he shook hands with Miss Butler, and lightly kissed his mother's cheek, who however, clung to him, holding both his hands.

"Oh! my dearest do not go!" she cried. "Or if you must go, will you promise to be very careful, Gilmore—I shall be miserable every hour you are away."

"Did you ever hear of such a silly old woman, Miss Butler," said Gilmore with rather an uneasy laugh, "wanting to tie her big son to her apron strings!"

"It is but natural she should be anxious about you," answered Miss Butler, with a certain reserve in her generally lively tones.

"There is nothing to be anxious about," went on Gilmore, "I have some business to see after, that is all."

"Are you going to the house in Eaton Square?" inquired Lady Gilmore anxiously.

"Yes, I have telegraphed to Proctor to have my rooms ready. Well, good-bye, mother, take good care of Miss Butler while I am away;" and with a smiling glance of his hazel eyes at Miss Butler, and a good-natured nod to his mother he left the room.

There was an uncomfortable pause after he was gone, and then Lady Gilmore forced herself to speak, and tried to hide her agitation and her fears.

"It is most unfortunate his being obliged to go in this hurried way," she said.

"It is rather strange, isn't it?" replied Miss Butler, remembering certain scandals about Gilmore, which had been known to her, but which had not prevented her thinking of him as a husband.

"He said it was some pressing business—law-business most probably—lawyers are so tiresome."

"Yes," said Miss Butler, and then she changed the subject, noting, however, with those sharp, bright blue eyes of hers, how restless and miserably anxious Lady Gilmore continued all the rest of the morning.

"I do not believe it is law-business," she kept thinking; but she said nothing more about Gilmore's absence, for she was a young woman who knew when to speak and when to be silent.

And the same day a visitor arrived at Wrothsley who served to change the current of her thoughts. This was Sir John Oakes, who had been laid up with an accident on the hunting field since he was last at Wrothsley, and now appeared looking pale and ill. He inquired for Gilmore, but hearing he had started in the morning for town, he asked if he could see Lady Gilmore, and was thus ushered into that lady's presence and Miss Butler's.

He was so nervous and agitated, that Lady Gilmore could not understand what was the matter with him, and answered so vaguely and wide of the mark to Miss Butler's lively speeches that she set him down in her mind as little better than a fool. Suddenly, however, with a deep blush rising on his homely, but not unpleasing features, Sir John blurted out the reason of his visit.

"I—I suppose," he said, "that you have Miss Loftus with you still?"

"Miss Loftus?" repeated Lady Gilmore, in great surprise. "Do you mean the children's governess?"

"Yes," answered Sir John, turning scarlet to the roots of his light tawny hair. "I—I—met her at Sir Charles Blenkinsop's, you know—I hope she is very well?"

"I believe she is quite well," said Lady Gilmore, haughtily and repressively.

Sir John was silent for a moment, and looked irresolute; then, with a great effort, he spoke again—

"I—should like to see her, Lady Gilmore—with your permission may I see her?"

Lady Gilmore regarded him with absolute astonishment.

"See her? I do not understand. Have you any business with her, any communications to make from Lady Blenkinsop?"

"I admire her very much," answered Sir John sturdily, now gaining courage, for he had called with a settled purpose in his mind, "and I should like to see her if you will allow me?"

Lady Gilmore's sallow complexion flushed, and she slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"You must forgive me when I tell you I never heard of such a thing," she said coldly. "Visit the children's governess! Impossible, I cannot allow it."

"But why, Lady Gilmore?"

"Why?" repeated Lady Gilmore hastily. "Your own sense ought to tell you why, Sir John!"

"I cannot see it," he answered quietly, "you must be quite sure I should not have asked you this favor, unless I had regarded Miss Loftus as my equal—which she is—and with the greatest admiration and respect."

Again Lady Gilmore slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"We need not discuss the question," she said; "it is

impossible that you can see Miss Loftus under this roof, if you wish to do so, you must see her when she is under Lady Blenkinsop's protection not mine."

Sir John bowed angrily and coldly, and a few moments later he took his leave, and the two ladies looked at each other as the door closed behind him.

"Did you ever hear of a man making such an extraordinary request?" asked Lady Gilmore.

Miss Butler raised her pretty dark eye-brows before she made any reply.

"You are very courageous," she said, "to keep such an attractive governess in the house."

"I never regarded her as very attractive," answered Lady Gilmore hastily. "I have scarcely looked at her. Lady Blenkinsop brought her here, you know, when Gilmore was very ill, and I have always thought her a quiet sort of girl."

"Yet that young man is evidently in love with her," continued Miss Butler with a cold hard smile. "I am really quite anxious to see such a paragon—let us pay a visit to the schoolroom, Lady Gilmore—perhaps we shall find Sir John Oakes with the governess in spite of your refusal."

"Impossible!" cried Lady Gilmore starting to her feet. "He dare not—but we can go and see."

And they actually did go; but when they reached the schoolroom, which Lady Gilmore entered with imperious haste, they found a very quiet, and apparently peaceful scene. Nancy was sitting reading near the shaded lamp on the table, and the children were playing at building a church with mimic bricks. Lady Gilmore felt half ashamed of her suspicions as she looked at them, and made a kind of apology to Nancy.

"I have brought Miss Butler to see your schoolroom, Miss Loftus," she said.

Nancy rose and bowed, and Miss Butler looked at her critically—looked at the pretty features, the blooming complexion, the slender, yet shapely form.

"She has a lovely face," she thought; "it is madness for Lady Gilmore to have her in the house."

But she crossed the room and talked very affably to Nancy and the children, and presently took up the book that Nancy had been reading, and as she did so, she saw with her quick eyes a half-frightened expression pass over Nancy's face.

"You are reading this?" she said, carelessly. "Do you like it?"

"I have scarcely got into it yet," answered Nancy; and as she spoke Miss Butler turned to the fly-leaf, on which, in a moment, she perceived inscribed the single word, "Gilmore."

But she made no remark; she laid the book quietly down, and no one looking at her could have guessed that at this instant a new suspicion had entered into her heart.

CHAPTER XII.

CONFIRMATION.

MISS BUTLER said nothing to Lady Gilmore, after they had quitted the schoolroom together, of having seen her son's name in the book Miss Loftus was reading; nor did she hint at the suspicions which had flashed into her own mind.

"She is very handsome," she said quietly, as they walked along the corridor, "too handsome for a governess."

"She is good-looking," admitted Lady Gilmore grudgingly, who had also noticed with dismay how pretty Nancy looked in the soft light of the shaded lamp.

"She is more than that," answered Miss Butler. "I do not wonder that Sir John Oakes or any other young man should admire her;" and as she said these words, Lady Gilmore's sallow cheeks flushed, and she began to think it was very thoughtless of Lady Blenkinsop to have brought such a girl to Wrothsley.

"She is too young," she said sharply, "the children ought to have an older woman to look after them I think."

"She looks like a girl who would be a great flirt—it is certainly very amusing about poor Sir John Oakes!" And Miss Butler laughed and then began to talk to Lady Gilmore about the armor; but she was not thinking of the old breast-plates and helmets, but of Gilmore's name in Nancy's book.

And the next morning she asked Lady Gilmore if she might take the children out with her for a walk in the park.

"And we'll leave the handsome governess at home, if we may?" she said, smiling; "I hate to talk to people of that kind!"

"Of course, my dear," answered Lady Gilmore; "and I am sure the children will be delighted to go with you, only don't let them bore you."

"They could never do that; they are two dear, beautiful little girls."

"They are like Gilmore, I think," said Lady Gilmore softly, and then she sighed, anxiously thinking of her absent son.

The children were delighted to go with Miss Butler, and that young lady very soon, and with affected carelessness, introduced the name of their governess.

"Do you like her?" she asked.

"Oh, very much," they both answered, "she is always kind and pleasant."

"Does your brother like her? But I suppose he doesn't know her?" continued Miss Butler, pursuing her inquiries.

"Oh, but he does, though," replied Dossy, with some pride in her tone, "I introduced them in the park one day, and he walked with us to the lake, and then he went away; and another day we had a talk with him, too, and he said something to Miss Loftus that made her face turn very red, but I do not know what it was."

"Ah!" said Miss Butler, and she drew in her pretty red lips tightly, and an angry flash shot into her blue eyes.

"And," she asked a moment later, "does Gilmore ever go into the schoolroom to play with you?"

"Oh no," said Dossy, "and yet we are not so far off him, either, so it is very mean of him, for his rooms, you know, are in the wing next to ours, but there's a staircase between them, but the doors are always locked, for Flossy and I have tried."

Miss Butler made one or two more inquiries, and then made an appointment with the children to view the armor in the corridor during the afternoon.

"Miss Loftus often walks in the corridor," volunteered Dossy, "every afternoon, about five now, she goes; but it's too cold for our taste, we prefer sitting by the schoolroom fire."

"Ah!" again ejaculated Miss Butler, for now she thought she understood it all. Why Gilmore had been cold and indifferent to her; why he never lingered by her side.

"He is carrying on an intrigue with the governess," she thought vindictively; "but I must be sure, and then Lady Gilmore shall know."

She went the same afternoon to the corridor, and having rapped at the schoolroom door, found the children alone there.

"Miss Loftus is walking outside," they told her: and then, when they proceeded to view the armor they met Nancy, but Miss Butler treated her with but scant courtesy, merely slightly bowing her head as they passed.

"We'll be back soon, Miss Loftus," cried Dossy, looking round, "we are only going to show Miss Butler the armor, some of it is very good, you know."

"Very well," answered Nancy, and with a flushed face and a beating heart she retired into the schoolroom, for there had been something in Miss Butler's manner she could not understand.

The other three—the children and Miss Butler—walked on to the very end of the corridor, Dossy pointing out the different pieces of ancient armor as they went. When they reach the door that led to the staircase, which was covered with green baize, Miss Butler touched it.

"Is this the door," she said, "that you told me about, that leads somewhere or other?"

Dossy eagerly explained:—"It leads to the west wing," she said, "where Gilmore's rooms are; you go in there, and then come to a staircase, and you go up the staircase, and then come to another door, but that one is always kept locked; in fact, I do not think it has a key; it is never used."

Miss Butler smiled vaguely.

"And these rooms," she said, pointing to one or two doors near the end of the corridor, "are they all used?"

"Oh no," answered Dossy, "they are bedrooms, but no one ever sleeps in them; the only rooms used down this corridor are ours—our schoolroom and bedroom, you know, and our maid's room, and our governess's—the rest are empty, like this one," and she turned the handle of one of the unused bedroom doors as she spoke.

"They seem nice rooms," said Miss Butler, looking in; and then she returned slowly up the corridor, her curiosity having been satisfied, and declined Dossy's eagerly urged hospitality to take tea with them in the schoolroom.

She did not mention this visit to the armory at dinner to Lady Gilmore, nor did she again speak of the governess during the days of Gilmore's continued absence. He was away five days, and then one morning, to his mother's unspeakable delight, she received a letter from him, to tell her that he would return to Wrothsley on the following afternoon.

"He has hurried back to see you, I am sure, my dear," she said, joyfully, to Miss Butler, whose face flushed strangely, as Lady Gilmore said these words, but it was not a happy blush that stained Miss Butler's cheeks.

And the same post which carried the news of her son's return to Lady Gilmore, brought another letter to Wrothsley. This was for Miss Loftus, and though not directed in the same handwriting, was yet from Gilmore, and Nancy read it with fast-beating, happy, yet troubled heart.

"My dear Miss Loftus, (I had almost written my dear sweet Nancy, for as such I always think and dream of you,) I shall be back to-morrow, and you know, I'm sure, why I am returning so soon? I am coming back to see you; to find out if you have kept your promise, and walked in the corridor every day while I have been away; and if you will keep it still, and meet me to-morrow at five o'clock at the old trysting-place? Do, sweet Nancy, for I am longing so to see you, and I remain always devotedly yours,—GILMORE."

No wonder that Nancy's young pulses throbbed and her heart beat fast as she read these tender words. He loved her then, and if he loved her truly what was there to part them, Nancy not unnaturally thought. True, Lady Gilmore would be very angry, but after all what could she say?

"My father was a gentleman," Nancy reflected a little proudly, "and though Gilmore may be very rich and we are poor, still money is not everything."

Poor little woman, she had only lately begun to realize that if not everything it is certainly much! That it makes happiness or misery, bright lives or sad ones, there is no doubt. The want of it is galling, the need of it great, but Nancy was too young quite to understand the vast difference the world would see between her position and Lord Gilmore's.

Her heart was in a sweet flutter all the day after she read Gilmore's letter, and her dark shining, dewy eyes

wandered again and again to the face of the school clock, as the hours wore away until the time she was to meet her lover.

And where was Lord Gilmore? At three o'clock he arrived at Wrothsley, and his mother who had been watching for the carriage which had been sent to the station to meet him, hurried down to welcome him, and clasped him eagerly in her arms.

He was looking stronger than when he went away, and he kissed his mother good-naturedly on both cheeks.

"And how is the dear old woman?" he said.

"Only too happy to see you again, dearest," she half-whispered, with her face against his; "I have been so anxious, so afraid?"

"What for?" he answered lightly. "And you still have Miss Butler here, I suppose?"

"Yes, she is a dear, kind girl, and I am so fond of her Gilmore."

He smiled, and gave his shoulders a little shrug.

"You women," he said, "are always in ecstasies over one another until you fall out; however, there is no doubt Miss Kate Butler is a good-looking girl."

A few minutes later he was talking to Miss Kate Butler in his mother's boudoir, and he never noticed the peculiar gleam in her blue eyes. Her manner was bright and gay to him as usual, and Gilmore talked to her in his pleasant, careless fashion for nearly an hour. Then she noticed he glanced for a moment at his watch, and rose and left the room shortly afterwards.

"Well," he said, "I am going for a smoke and a drink, if you ladies will excuse me; but I'll see you again during the evening, Miss Butler."

"Do dine with us this evening, Gilmore," urged his mother; "I am sure dear Kate here will not mind your not being able to use your arm yet."

"Consider my vanity!" he answered with a laugh; "having one's food cut for one like a baby before a young lady?"

"You know I should not mind," said Kate Butler.

"We shall see," smiled Gilmore, and then he went away. And he had scarcely left the room, when Miss Butler did so also.

"I have some letters to write before dinner," she told Lady Gilmore, "you won't mind my leaving you alone, will you?"

"Of course not, my dear child, give my love to your mother, and tell her how great a pleasure it is to us to have you here."

Thus Miss Butler was free to go, but she had not retired to write letters. With her light swift footsteps she passed at once from the part of the house where Lady Gilmore's boudoir was situated, and proceeded to the corridor where the armor hung, and where the children and their governess lived. When she arrived here she went quickly and silently past the schoolroom door, and without meeting or seeing a single creature walked to the very end of the corridor, and having done this, opened the door of one of the unused bedrooms there, and in an instant had vanished in its gloom.

She left the door one shade ajar, and crouched down behind it, and waited patiently more than half-an-hour. Then she plainly heard a man's footsteps (apparently) descending the staircase behind the green baize door, which the children had told her led to Gilmore's rooms. Her breath came short, and her heart beat fast, for a minute later the door opened, and Gilmore himself appeared.

He did not wait long alone. A light footstep and the rustle of a woman's gown now fell on Miss Butler's strained ears, and with a little exclamation of joy, Gilmore advanced a few steps, holding out both his hands.

"Nancy! I am so glad, so happy to see you again!"

Miss Butler heard the words quite distinctly, and she heard the answer.

"I have kept faith with you, you see," came from Nancy's rosy lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

TINGLING EARS.

STILL Miss Butler stood listening, with clenched hands and bated breath, though she knew that Gilmore's words and Nancy's were not intended for her ears.

And presently these very ears began to tingle with shame, for she heard her own name mentioned and Gilmore's comments on it.

"I have been on the rack for the last hour," he went

on, still holding Nancy's hands, "dying to come to you, yet forced to talk to that girl my mother has staying here."

"Miss Butler?" said Nancy, softly.

"Yes, she is a perfect nuisance; one of those young women so desperately on the look-out for a husband that she tries to attract every man she sees. I only wish she would go."

"Yet, she is handsome!"

"Do you think so? She is too sharp-looking for my taste, and always reminds me, somewhat unpleasantly, of her father, who is an impecunious old scamp."

Nancy gave a little laugh.

"But I did not come here to talk of Miss Butler," continued Gilmore, "but to someone much sweeter and lovelier. Nancy did you walk here every day while I was away?"

The half-whispered "yes," that fell so sweetly from Nancy's lips, still reached Miss Butler's burning ears.

"You dear, dear girl! And you thought of me sometimes then—tell me, Nancy?"

Again there was a little tremulous "yes."

"And I thought of you every moment of time," said Gilmore ardently; "didn't I tell you your sweet face would be always before me? Well, it was Nancy—and see what I have brought you, a little gift to show you that you were not forgotten?"

He drew from the pocket of his coat, and opened as he spoke a morocco case, and Miss Butler saw him. She saw too, even though the corridor was but dimly lighted, the glitter of the diamonds within, and how magnificent was the ornament that Gilmore had purchased for Nancy.

"This is for you," he said; "let me fasten it round your lovely little throat?"

But the girl put up her hands in answer.

"No, no!" she cried, "I cannot take it, Lord Gilmore—I cannot take anything."

"She is playing a high game," bitterly reflected Miss Butler.

"But you must," urged Gilmore. "Don't you like it? I took such pains in choosing it for you, and it was such a pleasure to me to do so."

"It is beautiful," said Nancy, looking with half-averted eyes at the sparkling gaud; "but indeed you must not ask

me to accept it, though it was so good of you to bring it."

"But I do ask you; I implore you to accept it, or you will make me think I have offended you."

"It is not that—but——"

"What is it then, sweet Nancy?"

The two were standing in their old attitude, leaning together against the green baize door, and suddenly—in a moment—Miss Butler saw Gilmore bend down and kiss Nancy's sweet upturned face.

"Oh! don't, don't Lord Gilmore!" she cried, pushing him away.

"But you know I love you? Oh! forgive me, Nancy, do not be angry—but you know I love you so well!"

"I will not come here any more if you do that," said Nancy in a half-angry tone.

"I promise I will not then; you will come to-morrow Nancy, won't you? I will not go away until you promise?"

"But you must go now, or the children will be coming out to look for me."

"Tiresome little brats!"

"'Tis nearly their tea-time you know, so you must go."

"Will you come half-an-hour earlier to-morrow, then? I have scarcely had a word with you: will you promise to be here at half-past four o'clock to the minute?"

"I will try."

"And do take this, Nancy," said Lord Gilmore, pushing the jewel-case into Nancy's hand, and actually as he did this, the schoolroom door at the other end of the corridor opened, and the children's fair heads appeared.

"Hush, here are the children," whispered Nancy, "go now; and Gilmore after pressing her hand, in which he left the jewel-case, disappeared behind the green baize door, and Nancy, after a moment's thought, concealed the case in her dress, and then met the children who came running towards her.

"We came to look for you," said Dossy; "it is twenty minutes past tea-time; may we ring for it, Miss Loftus?"

"Yes, do dear, I will be with you by the time it is there," answered Nancy in some confusion "but I am going into my own bedroom for a few minutes first."

The listener with the bitten lips, and white face, heard all this, and then ventured slightly to open the door of the room where she had hidden herself, and she saw the

children run on, and the governess go into a room before she reached the schoolroom, and close the door behind her. She still waited and the schoolroom bell rang, and the schoolroom maid appeared carrying a tea-tray, and presently the governess went into the schoolroom also, and Miss Butler decided that this was the time to fly.

She went along the corridor again with those swift and silent footsteps of hers, and she met no one as when she came. Finally she reached her own bedroom, and then the hidden passion, rage and shame, in her own heart burst forth. She was pale, panting, furious, and with clenched hands, knitted brows, and fierce blue eyes, she walked up and down her own bedroom, with hasty and irregular footsteps, considering how she could most bitterly punish the woman who had taken her intended lover away from her, and the man who had spoken of her so shamefully.

She did not appear again during the evening ; she felt she could not, but she presently sent her maid with a note to Lady Gilmore, to tell her she had been taken ill with a bad attack of neuralgia in her forehead, and to ask to be excused appearing at dinner. And that fierce, throbbing pain was only too real ! The violent emotions that she had gone through had sent the blood surging in her veins, and she was physically as well as mentally ill. The answer to this note was a visit from Lady Gilmore herself, who was all anxiety and kindness when she saw the changed face of her young guest.

But Miss Butler kept her tongue chained. She was too clever not to know Lady Gilmore's character, and to be sure if she told her now of her son's delinquencies, that in that impulsive, passionate way of hers, she would probably act in such a manner that Gilmore would think himself bound to protect the girl he had brought into trouble. No, she would wait until to-morrow, and she did wait. She did not go down to breakfast, but kept her room all day under pretence of illness ; but during the afternoon—about half-past three—she sent for Lady Gilmore, and that lady, as she entered the room, saw at once by Miss Butler's face that she had something serious to communicate to her.

“You are not worse, surely, my dear,” asked Lady Gilmore, anxiously.

"I am ill in body and ill in mind," answered Miss Butler, with great but suppressed excitement "I have something to tell you, Lady Gilmore—something shameful!"

"Shameful!" repeated Lady Gilmore, and her sallow cheeks paled.

"Yes, most shameful; but you must promise me, Lady Gilmore, before I tell you, to act wisely; not to be led away by your just anger."

"I do not understand you," faltered the mother, whose thoughts had turned instantly to her son.

"Do you remember," went on Miss Butler, with gathering passion, which, however, she tried to keep in check, "the day when Sir John Oakes called and asked to see Miss Loftus, and we went to the schoolroom after he was gone?"

"I remember—yes, certainly—but what has Miss Loftus to do with this?"

"I am coming to that presently; when we went into the schoolroom Miss Loftus was reading, and she laid down the book, and presently I took it up, and as I glanced at it—it was a new book I knew—I saw Gilmore's name written on the first page."

"Gilmore's!" repeated Lady Gilmore in consternation.

"Yes, Gilmore's," said Miss Butler bitterly, "and a sudden suspicion darted into my mind. I said nothing to you, for I thought it might be nothing; she might have picked the book up in the library—anywhere—but still I thought it strange, and the next day, while the children were in the park with me, I asked them if they liked their governess, and if their brother liked her? But of course he does not know her? I said."

"'Oh! yes,' answered little Dossy, 'he knows her quite well; he has walked in the park with us, and gone down to the lake with us, and one day he said something to Miss Loftus, that made her face turn very red.'"

"I cannot, I will not believe it!" cried Lady Gilmore starting to her feet.

"It is all too true; wait until you hear the rest. I asked the children if their brother ever went into the schoolroom to play with them, and they said 'no'; but added that he might do so very well if he liked, as there was a staircase from his wing of the house, communicating with the corridor where their rooms are."

"That staircase is never used, the door is always kept locked," said Lady Gilmore, loudly and passionately.

"Not always, it seems," answered Miss Butler, scornfully, "not yesterday, at least, for yesterday Gilmore went down it and met Miss Loftus by appointment at its foot."

"How do you know? I will not believe it; the children must have invented this."

"The children had nothing to do with it," said Miss Butler, the hidden passion and rage in her heart suddenly mastering her, and she too rose to her feet and stood facing Lady Gilmore, "I saw them meet with my own eyes, Lady Gilmore; I heard their love-making, and saw the diamonds he had brought her from town—and he kissed her——"

"What!" came hissing from Lady Gilmore's white, quivering lips.

"He kissed her," repeated Miss Butler vindictively, "and they agreed to meet again to-day—and they insulted me and my people, and spoke contemptuously of you."

"This is too much—my God, this is too much!" cried Lady Gilmore, and the expression of her face was so terrible, that the angry girl opposite to her felt a momentary compassion for the unhappy mother.

"I do not blame Gilmore so much," she said, "as this wretched girl, who has no doubt inveigled him and tempted him, and you know what men are when a pretty face is concerned. But I want you to act with prudence, and not give this creature the opportunity of appealing to Gilmore before you turn her out of the house."

Lady Gilmore did not answer immediately; a strange look had come into her dark eyes, and her lips kept moving as though she were muttering to herself, but no sound came forth.

"I want you to go with me now," continued Miss Butler, "and see them meet, with your own eyes, as I did. I went into one of the unused bedrooms at the end of the corridor, and I left the door a shade ajar, and I heard every word they said, and I heard them agree to meet to-day, at half-past four. Let them meet, Lady Gilmore, and wait until Gilmore is gone, and then send her away before she has the opportunity or chance of seeing Gilmore again."

Lady Gilmore looked at Miss Butler as though she did

not understand what she had been saying ; as though her own thoughts were far away.

“What is it you have been saying ?” she said. “Tell me again.”

Then Miss Butler repeated her advice, urging Lady Gilmore to make no scene before her son.

“If you do, you will only force him to defend her,” she said. “When he goes to meet her again let him find her gone.”

Lady Gilmore moaned aloud.

“He could not even respect my roof, then,” she uttered bitterly, “not after all I’ve done and suffered for his sake.”

“It was folly to have such a girl here, Lady Gilmore.”

“What did I know or think of the girl !” answered Lady Gilmore passionately. “Did I dream that my son would fall so low that he would dishonor his mother’s roof ?”

“We are wasting time in talking,” said Miss Butler impatiently ; “it is close on four now ; let us go at once, Lady Gilmore, while the children are still at their lessons, and the schoolroom door sure to be shut.”

And after a little further persuasion, the younger woman’s stronger will prevailed, and the two quitted Miss Butler’s bedroom, and went together to the children’s corridor, passing quickly and quietly down it, and soon reaching the unused bedrooms at its end. The schoolroom door, as Miss Butler had expected, was shut, and the corridor, as usual, dimly lighted, and they met no one, and soon found themselves in the bedroom nearest to the green baize door, which led to the staircase behind it.

They spoke very few words, and after they had been there a little while in the darkness, suddenly Miss Butler gripped hold of Lady Gilmore’s trembling, throbbing hand.

“Listen !” she whispered, “I hear his footsteps.”

And her acute sense of hearing was true. A moment later Lady Gilmore also heard a footstep on the staircase beyond ; and yet a moment more, and the handle of the green baize door softly turned, and Gilmore was before them.

Lady Gilmore’s heart beat so loudly and audibly at this moment, that Miss Butler grew afraid that Gilmore’s attention might be attracted—but no. He leaned against the green door for a second or two, and then walked a few steps leisurely forward, turned and came back to the door.

He did this twice, and the third time as he was advancing other footsteps fell on the two listeners' ears, and a bright, glad look passed over Gilmore's face.

"Nancy! naughty little witch! I thought you were going to play me false this time," they heard him say.

"No," answered Nancy's voice, "but I was afraid of attracting the children's attention by coming too soon."

"What little plagues they are, I wish they were out of the way; but one of my plagues, I am happy to say, is—Miss Butler is ill."

The two women who were listening clasped each other's hands spasmodically at these words.

"Oh, poor thing, what is the matter with her?" said Nancy.

"Something about her head, I believe," answered Gilmore carelessly, "I only hope it may get worse."

"You should not say that, and I am sure you don't mean it."

"Don't I though! It worries me to talk to her, all the time I am thinking of you, so I am very glad she is out of the way—may she remain so!"

A soft girlish laugh now jarred on the listeners' ears in reply to this speech of Gilmore's.

"Lord Gilmore, I have something to say to you," they heard next.

"And what is it, sweet Nancy?" he asked.

"About the present you brought me—the diamond necklace—I cannot take it; it is here, you must take it back?"

"Viper!" reflected Miss Butler at this moment.

"Wretch!" thought Lady Gilmore.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Gilmore; "I bought it for you, and unless you keep it, I shall think you don't like it, or that you hate me—which is it, Nancy?"

"Neither, you know very well—but it is too handsome, too grand for me."

"Nothing can be too handsome for you, or half handsome enough, for that matter. You are a little beauty, you know, Nancy, and you look so lovely at this moment, that if it were not that I am afraid you would be angry—"

"I shall be very angry, you know what you promised yesterday, Lord Gilmore?"

"Yes, I remember—well, don't be angry at any rate."

"But about this necklace—do please me by taking it back?"

"Do please me by keeping it," begged Gilmore.

"No, no, I cannot!"

"Yes, yes, you can!"

"How you tease me, Lord Gilmore."

"Do I, sweet Nancy? Well, I shall promise not to tease you any more, if you will keep the necklace?"

"I can bear it no longer," gasped Lady Gilmore in Miss Butler's ear.

"You must," she hissed back.

And the two outside went prattling on—sweet foolish words—fit for no other's ears; while the two crouching behind the closed door, listened with rage, jealousy, fury, increasing each moment in their hearts. It was all indeed that Miss Butler could do to restrain Lady Gilmore from bursting forth from her hiding-place, and pouring out her burning indignation on the unsuspecting ears of her son. Love, true and strong, is great and beautiful—that strange yearning of one life towards another, with its trust, its belief, its dawning hopes—but love-making! Let anyone recall the unfinished phrases, "the momentary touches of finger-tips," the glances, the sighs, the hundred follies—and conceive what they would have felt if they had known that *their* love-making had been watched and overheard. Happily Gilmore and Nancy were quite ignorant of the four angry eyes, and the four greedy burning ears that were drinking in each tender whisper, each amorous glance.

Long Gilmore lingered; long after Nancy told him it was time to go, that the children would be becoming impatient for their tea, and be coming to seek her as they had done yesterday.

"I cannot tear myself away," he said; but at last he went, went after kissing Nancy's hands, after persuading her to keep the diamond necklace, "until to-morrow at least."

"Will you really promise to take it back then?" asked Nancy, smiling too.

"Will you really promise to come?"

"Yes, really," she said, and after a few more words they parted, and Gilmore disappeared behind the green baize door, and Nancy smiling, rosy, fair, walked slowly down towards the schoolroom, carrying the diamond necklace in her hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

INSULTED.

SOME five or six minutes later, while Nancy stood leaning contemplatively against the school-room mantelpiece, having rung for the children's tea, the door of the room was flung violently open, and Lady Gilmore, pale, nay livid, with passion stalked in, closely followed by Miss Butler.

"Leave the house this moment, you disgraceful creature!" cried Lady Gilmore, approaching Nancy in a menacing attitude, her hands clenched, her whole form quivering with the violence of her feelings. "You shall not stay here another night, another moment!"

"What does this mean, Lady Gilmore?" asked Nancy, utterly astonished, and turning suddenly pale.

"Mean! I shall tell you what it means," shrieked the infuriated woman; "it means that you are disreputable! Utterly unfit ever to have been under this roof—fit for the streets, not for here!"

"Lady Gilmore!" exclaimed Nancy, starting back with horror.

"Oh you may start and pretend to look innocent, but I know better. A nice governess for my children, truly—a creature who inveigles their brother to meet her in dark passages, and induces him to bring her jewels—don't deny it; here is my evidence!"

And as she spoke Lady Gilmore advanced to the mantelpiece, and seized the jewel-case which Gilmore had induced Nancy to keep until the next day, and which Nancy had laid down there when she re-entered the school-room. In a moment it was now in Lady Gilmore's hands, a moment later she had opened it, and then in her passion disdainfully flung the glittering gaud upon the floor.

Nancy, who had now grown deadly pale, did not stoop to raise it. She stood there facing the angry two who had watched her, and were now insulting her, and she looked at them not a little scornfully.

"You are speaking to me and treating me disgracefully, Lady Gilmore," she said. "Send for Lord Gilmore, and ask him the truth about our acquaintance."

"A very likely thing for Lady Gilmore to do," sneered Miss Butler with bitter emphasis.

"A just thing at all events," retorted Nancy with spirit, who was now roused to defend herself.

"No, I shall *not* send for him!" said Lady Gilmore excitedly. "I shall send you out of the house at once, and not give you the opportunity of again enticing him into folly."

She furiously rang the bell as she spoke, and a minute later the schoolroom maid, who had been on her way there carrying the children's tea, and thought this second bell (Nancy had rung before) was to hasten her footsteps, entered the room, and naturally felt some surprise when she saw the excited group there.

"Tell the butler to come to me here at once," said Lady Gilmore addressing her; "and after you have done so, you go into Miss Loftus' bedroom and pack her clothes. She is leaving for good immediately, so leave nothing behind."

"Lady Gilmore, I have a right to demand that I should not be treated in such a manner," expostulated Nancy.

"You shall see who has a right to act in this house," retorted Lady Gilmore; "and out of it you go!"

"But, mother, what has she done?" now inquired Dossy, for the children had been awestricken spectators of the whole scene.

"Hold your tongue, child," sharply answered Lady Gilmore.

"At all events let me go to Lady Blenkinsop's for the night?" said Nancy. "My mother is an invalid, and my going without any notice might make her worse."

"No, I won't let you go to Lady Blenkinsop's; Lady Blenkinsop ought never to have allowed you to come here, but I suppose you took her in, and pretended to be as innocent as you look," said Lady Gilmore, who was still in a towering rage. "I will send you back to town to-night with the butler, and give him orders that he is never to leave you until you are at your mother's—if you really have a mother!"

"Which is very doubtful I think," scoffed Miss Butler. Nancy looked from one to another, and something of

her soldier-father's brave spirit kindled in her dark eyes.

"You are insulting a defenceless girl most unjustly," she said ; "but I have a good mother, and I have a home, and I little thought when I left it for the first time, to come here, that I should ever have been treated as I have been to-day."

Neither Lady Gilmore nor Miss Butler deigned to make any reply to this. True Miss Butler shrugged her shoulders contemptuously, and then turned her back on Nancy, and the entrance of the butler now created a diversion.

The butler was a man of solemn and substantial port, who had grown rich in the service of the family, and respected them accordingly. He had lived at Wrothsley in the time of the last lord, and knew many things that he never talked about. He had bowed gravely as he entered, and took in the whole situation, with his sagacious green eyes, at a glance.

"Graham," said Lady Gilmore, addressing him, "I wish you to order a carriage at once to take this young person to the station, and I wish you to go with her to town. My orders are that you see her safely to her mother's house, wherever it be, and you have not to let her out of your sight until you leave her there."

Graham respectfully drew his thirty-guinea gold watch out of his pocket, and contemplatively regarded its face.

"There is a train for town passes the station at seventeen, my Lady," he said ; "if the young lady is quick we can catch that, for it is only five-thirty now, but we should leave here in a quarter-of-an-hour."

"That will just suit—you must catch it—do you hear, Miss Loftus? and you," turning to the schoolroom maid, "go instantly and pack Miss Loftus' clothes."

Nancy made no further remonstrances ; she walked out of the schoolroom with her pretty head raised high, and a strong sense of indignation in her heart. And she looked so handsome as she did this, that Lady Gilmore glanced after her with an undefined feeling of fear. Would Gilmore really give her up? She might send her away from Wrothsley without his knowledge, but she might write, and he might follow her. But surely he would not be so mad. Yet even as this thought passed through her mind, her eyes fell on the glittering diamonds lying on the hearthrug, and she was too good a judge of precious stones not to know their value.

She muttered something, stooped down and picked up the necklace and restored it to its case.

"Did she steal it, mother?" asked curious Miss Dossy.

Lady Gilmore made no reply to this question. She remained in the schoolroom silent, gloomy, until she saw poor Nancy's luggage carried past by one of the footmen and the schoolroom maid; but Miss Butler poured herself out some tea and drank it greedily.

"We have had no tea, Miss Butler," said Dossy, addressing her; and as Miss Butler was helping her, Dossy again half-whispered:

"Did she really steal the diamonds, Miss Butler?"

"Do not ask any questions, Dossy, she is a very disgraceful young person," answered Miss Butler.

"But I am sorry, she was always so kind," said the little girl.

And presently when Nancy herself, dressed in her hat and cloak, walked passed the open schoolroom door, followed by the butler, also attired for travelling, Dossy and Flossy both half rose as though to bid her good-bye.

"No, stay where you are," said their mother, "you have not to speak to her," and so, without a word of farewell, Nancy was sent away.

Lady Gilmore spoke to the butler for a moment, and gave him some money, and the butler then led the way to one of the back entrances of the castle, where a carriage stood waiting for Nancy, and having respectfully handed her into this, and seen her luggage sent on a light cart, the butler mounted on the box beside the coachman, and Nancy was once more alone.

Alone with her bitter, bitter thoughts. The poor girl indeed quite broke down, and leaned back against the carriage, sobbing aloud, over this ignominious ending to her sojourn at Wrothsley. And the self-consciousness too that she was not quite blameless, that she had been foolish, perhaps imprudent, rankled in her heart.

"Oh, what will mother say, what will mother say!" she moaned half aloud; and then suddenly remembered, with burning cheeks, that Aunt Fannie was also still with Mrs. Loftus, and Nancy knew she had no mercy to expect from Mrs. Barclay's rough-edged tongue.

Her face was pale, and her eyes red and swollen when she reached the station, and tremblingly produced her meagre little purse. But Graham, the butler, observing

this action, though pretending not to see the tear-stains, advanced in his respectful way.

“My Lady,” he said, “ordered me to pay all the expenses of the journey; and he at once took a first-class ticket for Nancy, and a second-class ticket for himself; and, during the journey, at each station, went to Nancy’s carriage-door to inquire if she would take tea or any other refreshment.

At one of the stations Nancy did drink a cup of tea, for she felt faint, worn and cold, and it was ten o’clock before they arrived at Paddington, with the prospect of a long drive also, ere they reached Nancy’s little suburban home.

It was a very dreary drive this! Nancy’s heart sank lower and lower as they went on, for she would be forced to give some explanation at once, for her unlooked for return. And the true one was so painful, so degrading Nancy felt. But at last they reached the (in summer) pretty street in West Hampstead, in which Mrs. Loftus lived. The cab stopped, and Graham went to the door to inquire the number of the house, and Nancy gave it with a faltering tongue.

Again the cab stopped—she was at home—returned poorer than when she went away; and the two ladies in the house—Mrs. Loftus and Mrs. Barclay—hearing the ring at the street door, at this—for them—late hour, listened anxiously, while the new one-maid of the establishment (with the exception of the dusky-skinned ayah) replied to the summons.

There was a little parley, for the maid was a new one, and then Mrs. Loftus, rising hastily, heard her daughter’s voice in the passage.

“It’s Nancy!” she cried, and the next moment she was clasping the poor, weary, trembling girl to her breast, and covering the tear-stained face with kisses.

“My darling! What is the matter? Why did you not let us know you were coming?” she asked anxiously; and then her eyes fell on Graham, who was assisting the cabman to carry in the luggage.

The butler, seeing he had attracted the attention of the sad-faced lady in the widow’s cap, at once went forward.

“Pardon me, madam,” he said, “for intruding at this hour, but Lady Gilmore desired me to see the young lady safely home, and I have done so; I presume I am addressing Mrs. Loftus?”

"Yes, I am Mrs. Loftus—but why—"

"The young lady will explain," answered Graham; "I think, Miss, all your luggage is right now?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, but I must pay the cab," said Nancy raising her head from her mother's breast.

"That is all settled," replied Graham respectfully; "and now I will bid you good-evening, Miss, and I hope you are not much fatigued after your journey?"

Nancy then tried to thrust one of her last half-sovereigns into Graham's hand, but that dignified man declined to receive any gratuity. He bowed gracefully to the mother and daughter, and then closed the street-door behind him, and as the cab drove away, Nancy's head once more sank down on her mother's shoulder.

"My dearest Nancy, how pleased I am to see you again," said Mrs. Loftus fondly, drawing her closer.

"Oh! but mother you don't know—such a dreadfully disagreeable thing has happened," half-whispered Nancy.

"Never mind, darling, when it has sent you to me—tell your mother what it is, dear?"

But Nancy found this beyond her strength at the present moment, for Mrs. Barclay, unable any longer to suppress her curiosity, though she was terribly afraid of draughts, now advanced into the passage holding her handkerchief to her mouth, and looked at Nancy inquiringly and suspiciously.

"Well Nancy, this is a surprise?" she said from behind her handkerchief

"Yes, Aunt Fannie," answered poor Nancy in a subdued tone.

"Come into the sitting-room my dear," said gentle Mrs. Loftus, and when Aunt Fannie had followed the mother and daughter there, after carefully closing the door behind her, she once more regarded Nancy suspiciously.

"I hope, Nancy," she asked, "that this does not mean that you have had some disagreement with Lady Gilmore?"

Nancy was silent for a moment, and Aunt Fannie immediately was satisfied that her surmise was correct.

"However did you allow such a thing to happen?" she said. "I warned you, you know, to be very submissive in your manner to her Ladyship. Dear me, dear me! and to go and lose such an excellent situation almost at once!"

“Nancy will tell us all about it presently,” said Mrs. Loftus; “after she has got her hat and cloak off, and is rested a little. Let us go upstairs to my room now, Nancy dear, and when we come down you will tell Aunt Fannie how it has all happened.”

Nancy was only too glad to avail herself of this suggestion, and followed Mrs. Loftus to her bedroom with a heavy heart. Then, when she got there, she once more nestled to her mother’s breast.

“Oh! mother, I have got into such trouble,” she said in a broken voice.

And presently by dint of gentle inquiries and fond words, Mrs. Loftus heard the whole story, and even her face grew very grave as she listened to Nancy’s faltering explanation of her unlooked-for return.

“But my dear, did you really go and meet this young Lord secretly?” she asked anxiously.

Nancy was obliged to confess that this was so, “only once or twice you know,” she added with her dark soft eyes cast down, and as her mother looked at her she could not suppress a heavy sigh.

“She is too young and too handsome to go into the world alone,” she was thinking, “poor, poor fatherless child!”

“But Lady Gilmore need not have been so rude, so insulting,” said Nancy plucking up some spirit. “There was no such great harm in talking to him for half-an-hour sometimes, but I know who made all the mischief—a Miss Butler who is staying there, and who wants to marry Lord Gilmore, only he doesn’t care for her at all.”

Again Mrs. Loftus sighed softly, and then went to see after her young daughter’s refreshment. Aunt Fannie, whose appetite was capricious, though good, had had a toothsome fowl cooked for her own early dinner during the day, and the remainder of this bird she soon beheld to her annoyance, and scarcely concealed vexation, now brought up on a tray to assist at her niece’s supper. Aunt Fannie had reckoned on it stewed with oysters for the next day, and to see Nancy eating a portion of it after being returned upon their hands in such an extraordinary, nay, disgraceful, manner, was more than this good woman’s temper could bear.

She therefore retired to bed in a dudgeon, after various muttered prognostications of speedy ruin overtaking them

all, and thus not a little added to Nancy's discomfiture.

Nevertheless she slept soundly, and dreamed that she was standing again with Gilmore, in the dimly lighted corridor at Wrothsley, with the old armor frowning down from the walls, in grim contrast to the dalliance of youth and love.

CHAPTER XV.

NOT AT THE TRYST.

AND now shall we see how it was faring with Gilmore, while the girl who had won his fancy lay dreaming of him, after being ignominiously sent forth from under his roof for his sake! He was, however, in a state of happy ignorance of this fact until the next evening after Nancy had left Wrothsley. Lady Gilmore, in truth, exhausted with the rage and excitement she had gone through, felt quite unequal to face her son, and made the same excuse as Miss Butler had done the day before for not appearing either at dinner after her stormy interview with Nancy, nor yet on the following morning.

Miss Butler also was too angry and sore to care to speak to Gilmore, and he was thus left by the two ladies to amuse himself as best he could. Gilmore never cared very long to do this. He was no great reader, and the time hung rather heavy on his hands, lightened, however, by pleasing excitement when he thought again and again of his late interviews with Nancy, and dreamed of those to come.

It was, of course, very well known in the household that the governess had been turned out of it, and it was also pretty shrewdly guessed why. One of the head gardeners had not forgotten the evening when Miss Loftus had walked under the spreading palms with the young lord, and they had been seen together too in the park. The fact that the butler had been sent to town with Miss Loftus spoke volumes; and thus Gilmore's valet, when he was attending to him in the evening before he retired to bed, and helping him to dress the next morning, did not dare to presume to mention Miss Loftus' name to him, not knowing how much his lord knew and did not know,

Gilmore therefore was in complete ignorance of his mother's conduct, and poor Nancy's banishment, and spent the morning in reading a French novel, smoking cigarettes, and thinking of her.

"My little beauty, my little darling," he said softly to himself again and again, recalling the soft light in Nancy's dark eyes, and the smiles on her rosy lips. The time, in truth, seemed endless to him until he could go to keep their tryst; and he watched the shadows darkening, and the mist lying over the park deepening from gray to dusk with absolute impatience.

At last the hour came, and Gilmore made his way to the corridor where he expected to meet Nancy, but as we know no Nancy was there. He went at half-past four, and he waited until a quarter-past five by the green baize door, and then he could bear it no longer. He therefore walked down the corridor to the schoolroom door, and having rapped, and been told to enter by Dossy's voice from within, did so, and found the only occupants of the room were the two children and the schoolroom maid.

"Gilmore!" cried both the little girls with delight, as they jumped up from the table and ran towards him.

The maid now retired and Gilmore, finding himself alone with his young sisters, at once asked them where Miss Loftus was.

"Oh! don't you know," said Dossy, "about the awful row?"

"What row?" inquired Gilmore sharply.

"Oh! mother made a fearful row yesterday evening," explained Dossy. "Miss Loftus had been walking in the corridor, as she always does, you know, and then she came in here to give us some tea, and we were just sitting down when mother and Miss Butler walked in, and mother was in such a rage we were quite frightened."

"What did she say?" asked Gilmore with a darkening brow.

"She called Miss Loftus bad names—a disgraceful creature, and a reprobate, I think, and she said she should never stay another night in the house—that she wasn't fit to be in a house at all—and she packed her off there and then, and she sent Graham away with her, and we are so sorry."

"Sent her out of the house?" repeated Gilmore angrily.

"Rather; but I don't know what she had done, Gilmore, but mother snatched a jewel-case off the mantel-piece that Miss Loftus had laid down there a few minutes before, and shouted out—for oh! didn't she bawl—something about inducing someone to meet her in dark passages, and she said 'don't deny it—this is my evidence!' And she flung the case on the floor, and such lovely diamonds came out, and—we are afraid she had been trying to steal them."

Gilmore's face had grown dusky red during this narrative, and now something very like a curse burst from his lips.

"And what did Miss Loftus say?" he asked the next moment, trying to speak calmly.

"Oh, she looked very proud, and told mother she was speaking to her and treating her disgracefully, and she said, 'Send for Lord Gilmore, and ask him the truth about this'—I think that was what she said, and didn't they go on at her after that, mother and Miss Butler too; and mother said she should never have a chance of seeing you again, and enticing you—I am sure she said that—and they twitted her about her mother and said no end of horrid things."

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves," said Gilmore passionately.

"I thought so too," answered Dossy with dignity; "and I asked what she had done—if she had stolen the diamonds, and they had caught her—but they told me to hold my tongue."

"What folly! Stolen the diamonds indeed; why, I could not induce her to take them."

"Oh! I'm so glad!" cried Dossy. "You gave them to her, then, Gilmore? I thought as much."

"I gave them to her, and I bought them for her, and I suppose Miss Butler is at the bottom of all this, and it is out of jealousy and spite that they have insulted this poor girl. But my mother shall repent it, bitterly repent it," continued Gilmore, beginning to walk up and down the schoolroom with hasty steps and a frown upon his brow.

"Now, when I think of it," said Dossy, sagely, "I do believe Miss Butler has been at the bottom of the row, Gilmore, for I remember her asking me questions about you and Miss Loftus; if you knew her, and I said 'Oh yes;' and if you came to the schoolroom ever, and if you ever walked with us, and so on,"

“ And what did you say ? ”

“ I told her you never came to the schoolroom, though you were so near to us, and I showed her the door at the end of the corridor that leads to your rooms, you know ; but I said you walked with us sometimes.”

“ With you and Miss Loftus ? ”

“ Yes ; we had a good long talk about it, and she asked about the unused bedrooms at the end of the corridor, and no end of things—she was very curious, now I remember.”

Gilmore gave a hard and bitter laugh. He understood it all now ; this girl had acted as a spy, and had probably seen and overheard some of his interviews with Nancy. He remembered, too, how he had spoken of Miss Butler, and he laughed again at the thought. But he was very angry. He stood silent, with his back to the fire, as his little sister went prattling on ; telling him all the details of Nancy's departure, and how the schoolroom-maid had said that Graham had come back from town in the mid-day train ; and how the coachman had told the maid he was sorry for Miss Loftus, for that when they got to the station, her eyes were all red and swollen with crying, and she seemed in a very bad way.

“ Do you know her address in town, Dossy ? ” presently asked Gilmore, abruptly interrupting Dossy's discourse.

But Dossy did not know it.

“ Mother would not even let us say good-bye to her, you know,” she told Gilmore ; who nodded twice, then stooped down and kissed both his little sisters.

“ Thank you for telling me all this,” he said ; “ but don't tell mother that you have done so, nor that spy, Miss Butler. Keep it a secret, Dossy and Flossy ; ” and with a smile and another nod he went away.

He proceeded straight to his own suite of rooms, and when he reached them rang the bell, and ordered Graham the butler to be sent to him at once.

This was such an unusual proceeding, that under the circumstances Graham received the message with a troubled heart. But it had to be obeyed, and a few minutes later the butler was standing before the young lord.

Gilmore did not beat about the bush, but made the inquiries he intended to ask, in a tone of authority.

“ You were sent by Lady Gilmore up to town last

evening with Miss Loftus," he said. "To what address there did you take her?"

Graham hesitated a moment. He quite understood the situation. "My lady has sent the governess away on the account of my lord," he knew; and Graham was a prudent man, and wise wherewithal in his generation, and would very much have preferred not to have been asked this question. He therefore cast down his eyes, and assumed an air of thoughtful consideration.

"It was towards the West Hampstead way, my lord," he said, "but of course not being acquainted with that district, the exact name of the street just at the present moment, has escaped my mind."

"Please recall it then, and give me an exact answer," said Gilmore sharply, and Graham after another moment's hesitation, and also remembering that he was dealing with his lord, and that after all Lady Gilmore was only the dowager, discreetly drew out a pocket-book to which he referred.

"I may have it here, my lord," he remarked, "excuse my looking—yes, my lord, here it is—Mrs. Loftus, 17 Priory-road, West Hampstead; the young lady gave it to me I remember, now, to direct the cabman."

Gilmore took down the address in silence, and then drew out a five pound note.

"Thank you," he said, "and as I do not wish to get you into any trouble with Lady Gilmore, you need not mention to anyone that you gave me the address—take this for your trouble."

Graham bowed low as the crisp note touched his fingers, and was satisfied now that he had answered prudently.

"And send Foster to me at once," continued Gilmore looking at his watch, "and order a carriage round, to take me to the station to catch the ten minutes past seven train. I am going to town, but do not mention this in the household until after I am gone."

Again Graham bowed low, and then hurried away to obey the orders of his lord.

"She's too 'igh'anded, is my lady," he reflected as he went; "she was the same with the late 'un, and they won't stand it, it's no good."

He was mentally referring to the late Lord Gilmore, whose quarrels with his wife, and their causes, Graham

had been very well acquainted with. But he made haste to send Gilmore's valet, Foster, to him, and when he appeared Gilmore ordered him at once to pack.

"I am going to town for some time, so gather up all my belongings," he told the valet; and while Foster was busy doing this he sat down to write a note to his mother.

"Dear mother," he wrote, "I am leaving Wrothsley this evening for an indefinite time, as I do not choose to have a spy set to watch my actions, nor that a young lady should be insulted merely because I have been civil to her.—I remain, yours truly,
GILMORE."

"P.S.—Kindly return the diamond necklace, which belongs to me, to the house at Eaton Square."

He gave this note to the butler to deliver before he left.

"Give it to Lady Gilmore at dinner-time, but not before," he told him; "if she inquires if you gave me the address I asked for, you can tell a lie about it if you like—say you didn't."

Once more Graham bowed low, and smiled a little grimly.

"Very well, my lord," he said.

Many lies had this discreet man told in the old days, and somehow he always happened never to be found out. He had a quiet tongue for one thing which never babbled unnecessarily, and this is a great and precious gift. And before the night was over he thought it incumbent upon him to lie again.

In the meanwhile Gilmore had left Wrothsley, and while his mother was trying to summon up courage to reproach him for his conduct with Miss Loftus, he was quickly speeding out of her way. She made up her mind at last, and about eight o'clock in the evening went to his rooms, which to her immense surprise and consternation, she found empty.

She violently rang the bell, which was answered by one of the footmen.

"Where is Lord Gilmore?" she asked, impatiently.

"I cannot say, my lady," answered the footman, who knew perfectly well, but who thought the storm might as well fall on other shoulders than his own.

"Send his valet to me," commanded my lady.

The footman bowed and retired, well knowing that the

valet was at this moment travelling with his lord to London, but that of course was no business of his.

He returned in a few minutes.

"Foster, my lord's valet is not in the Castle, my lady," he said: "he has gone to town with my lord in the seven o'clock train."

"To town!" repeated Lady Gilmore, and her face grew pallid, and she staggered forward and grasped the back of a chair. "Who told you this?" she asked the next moment.

"The butler, my lady," answered the footman.

"Tell him instantly to come here," cried Lady Gilmore; and Graham went, feeling that he had been thrust into a most unfair and difficult position.

"What does this mean?" asked Lady Gilmore the moment he appeared. "Am I to understand that Lord Gilmore is gone without seeing me; without telling me of his intentions?"

"My lord left a note for you, my lady," answered Graham, quietly.

"A note?" Then why was it not delivered to me at once?"

"My lord gave me particular orders not to do so my lady; he said—give this to Lady Gilmore at dinner-time, but not before—this is the note my lady."

Lady Gilmore snatched it impulsively from the man's hand, and as she read the hard words it contained, she gave a hoarse cry of anguish and passion.

"Who has told him all this? Who has told him about that girl?" she asked, the next moment, turning like a fury on the butler. "Did you, Graham? It must have been you!"

"It certainly was not, my lady," answered the butler, firmly.

"Who told him then?"

"That I cannot say; certainly not me; but this evening my lord sent for me, and he knew then that I had taken Miss Loftus last night to town, for he told me so."

"Did he ask for her address?"

"No, my lady, he made no inquiries," said the butler, unblushingly. "He simply told me he was going to town, and that I was to give you the note at dinner-time."

"She has written to him," thought Lady Gilmore, despairingly: "and Kate Butler has done all this."

The poor woman in her anger and fear next acted very unjustly. She ran to Miss Butler's room, carrying Gilmore's note in her hand, and to the great indignation of that young lady began to abuse her without stint.

"Look what you have made me do!" she cried. Gilmore is gone—he has gone after that girl, and he says we have been spying on his actions, and so we have?"

"His conduct was very disgraceful," said Miss Butler, turning suddenly red.

"You have only made it worse; you watched him, and got me to watch him, and this is the end!"

Miss Butler shrugged her shoulders.

"The end would probably have been the same in any case," she said; "the girl, I suppose, has written to him, and you would not have cared, under the circumstances, I conclude, to have kept her in the house?"

"You have only done harm!" raged Lady Gilmore. "and you have sent my son away from me!"

But it is needless to write any more of her unseemly words. The quarrel ran so high that Miss Butler wrote to her mother the same evening, to tell her that she would return home the next day. "As for Gilmore," Miss Butler added, "his conduct is such that it would be impossible for any respectable girl to marry him; I shall tell you more when I see you," and so on.

Thus ended Lady Gilmore's scheme about the marriage of her son; and when the grand-aunt at Gateford Manor House heard of her failure, and the story about the governess—for she always contrived to know everything that happened at Wrothsley—she said, spitefully, that she was not surprised.

"My lady always puts her foot into everything," she said; "and as for Gilmore, he's his father over again, every inch."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST BLOW.

MRS. BARCLAY was very bitter indeed about Nancy's return, and when during the next day Mrs. Loftus was forced to admit that the cause of it was "some folly about young Lord Gilmore talking to her," Aunt Fannie

at once declared that Nancy's conduct had been disgraceful.

"She always was a girl who tried to attract attention," she said virtuously, "and you see this is the end of it. What are you going to do about it, Lucy, for it is quite impossible that you can afford to keep her at home, and who will take her as a governess now, when both Lady Gilmore and Lady Blenkinsop will of course have turned against her?"

Mrs. Loftus however did not take quite such a dismal view of Nancy's shortcomings.

"I will write to Lady Blenkinsop and explain," she said; "Lady Gilmore is known to be a very quick-tempered woman, and I hope it will all come right; after all it was not such a very dreadful thing for a young man to like to talk to a pretty girl."

Aunt Fannie shook her head.

"Ladies in their position won't stand that kind of thing," she said; "I consider that Nancy has thrown away her one chance in life, and she will never have another."

All this was of course, very trying to poor Nancy, for Aunt Fannie considered it her duty to be disagreeable the whole day, and made constant allusions to their want of means, and misfortunes in general. Nancy tried to play with the children, and forget her wounded feelings, but somehow she could think of no one but Gilmore, and kept wondering what he would feel and what he would do when he found out how disgracefully she had been treated.

And she knew the next morning, for the early post brought her a letter from him which Gilmore had written after he arrived in town the night before, and which filled Nancy's heart with the wildest excitement.

"My dear sweet Nancy," the girl read with dewy eyes and a beating heart, "I cannot tell you what I felt when I went to our old trysting-place this afternoon at half-past four, and you never came! I waited until a quarter past five, and then I could bear the suspense no longer, and so went to the schoolroom door and rapped. Dossy called to me to go in and I went, and found only the children and their maid. The maid went away, and then Dossy told me the whole story, and how shamefully you had

been treated. My blood boiled as I listened, and I soon found out from Dossy how it had all happened. That wretched girl Kate Butler had learnt from the little ones that I knew you, and I am almost sure had watched us—nay I am sure she did—so, without saying a word to my mother, I left Wrothsley by the evening train, and before I left I got your address from Graham.

“And now, my dear sweet Nancy, when and where shall I see you; do let it be to-morrow, for I can wait no longer. When you get this, therefore, will you send me a telegram, and I shall meet you at any place and at any hour you appoint. Do not disappoint me, for I have so much to tell you. And I remain ever lovingly yours,
“GILMORE.”

Nancy kissed these lines after she had read them and they brought hope to her heart, and yet she felt she could not deceive her mother, and go to meet Gilmore without her knowledge. Therefore she wrote to tell him this, and went out and posted the letter long before Aunt Fannie had made her first appearance.

“Dear Lord Gilmore,” a few hours later Gilmore read, who had waited patiently all the morning in the house at Eaton-square, expecting a telegram from Nancy; “I was very glad to get your letter, for the way in which I was treated at Wrothsley made me very unhappy. But I cannot go out to meet you, for it would vex my dear mother very much, and I cannot deceive her, for she is so good and kind to me, and I love her so dearly. But I hope you will not quite forget me, and I shall often think of the happy hours we spent together, which I suppose were too good to last.—Yours very sincerely,
“NANCY.”

Lord Gilmore was a spoilt child of fortune, and every wish of his heart had always been his. Therefore this letter of Nancy's first made him very angry, and then made him more determined than ever to see her, and more in love with her than ever, too!

He received it about two o'clock, and by three he had made up his mind. He would go to her mother's house to see her, whatever it cost him. And he did go. Nancy was sitting alone, thinking sadly enough, in the little drawing-room without a fire, for Mrs. Loftus's narrow means could only afford one in the sitting rooms; and

Aunt Fannie, after making herself very trying during the early dinner, had fallen into a gentle doze over the dining-room fire, when she was roused by a hansom cab driving up and stopping at the street-door.

She started to her feet and ran first to the mirror to see if her wig was straight, and then went to the room-door, and listened to try to learn who the visitor was; and she distinctly heard a man's voice inquire for "Miss Loftus."

"What name shall I say, sir?" asked the maid; and to Aunt Fannie's great excitement and consternation she heard the answer:

"Lord Gilmore."

"This is really most bare-faced," thought Aunt Fannie, and while the two upstairs were standing with clasped hands, downstairs Aunt Fannie was in a state nearly bordering on distraction, for her sister-in-law Mrs. Loftus had gone out on an errand, and Aunt Fannie could not make up her mind what exactly it was her duty to do.

In the meanwhile let us leave Aunt Fannie in her perplexity, and listen to what the young pair are saying to each other in the fireless room.

Nancy had started to her feet also when she heard the cab drive to the door, and stood with beating heart and bated breath during the few moments that followed, until Lord Gilmore's name was announced. Then she went forward, pale, trembling, silent, and Gilmore also did not speak as he clasped both her hands.

"You see I could not wait," he said at last.

"It—it is very good of you," faltered Nancy.

"Good!" echoed Gilmore; "good to myself, you mean, Nancy. I have been just mad since I heard the shameful way you have been treated; but it was all that horrid girl, I am sure, and my only consolation is thinking how her ears must have tingled when I was abusing her, if she was listening to us."

"How could she listen?" asked Nancy, with a charming blush, remembering certain foolish words.

"I have an idea, from something the child Dossy said, that she had hidden herself in one of those rooms at the end of the corridor, that I always thought were kept locked. But what matter if she did listen? I only care because it has brought worry and pain to you.

"Oh! it was so dreadful, Lord Gilmore!"

“Don’t vex yourself about it any more, my sweet Nancy,—and so you wouldn’t come, and meet me, you dear, naughty little witch?”

“My mother would be angry.”

“And you never thought, I suppose, that I should be angry if you didn’t? I was angry, I can tell you, but I came to town to see you, and I wasn’t going to be baulked.”

“But Lord Gilmore——”

“What about your pretty ‘buts’?”

“You know we can’t go on seeing each other.”

“Oh, can’t we? We just can then, sweet Nancy; nothing will induce me to give you up.”

By this time Mrs. Loftus had returned to the house, and as she entered the dining-room, Aunt Fannie majestically rose to the occasion.

“Who do you think is upstairs, Lucy; I ask you, who?” she said, with extreme gravity.

Mrs. Loftus’s delicate complexion changed.

“With Nancy?” she asked quickly.

“Yes, with Nancy. I consider it monstrous—Lord Gilmore is upstairs.”

“He may have called to apologize,” faltered Mrs. Loftus.

“Nothing of the sort! He has called to continue an acquaintance which can only have a bad end. Now, Lucy, will you do your duty, or shall I? Your duty is to forbid this man to come to this house, where you may be sure he only comes for improper purposes; do not forget that though you are poor, your husband and Nancy’s father was a gentleman and my brother, and my husband also was a gentleman, both in the service.”

Mrs. Loftus, who was a timid and retiring woman hesitated.

“Will you do it, or shall I?” continued Aunt Fannie determinately.

“I shall go and speak to him,” said Mrs. Loftus; “of course, he should not come here.”

And, with a sinking heart, Mrs. Loftus did go upstairs, and as she opened the drawing-room door the two inside, who were standing suspiciously near to each other, started suddenly apart.

“My mother—Lord Gilmore,” said Nancy nervously.

Mrs Loftus bowed gravely, and Gilmore bowed, and then Mrs. Loftus found courage to speak the words she came to say.

"I think, Lord Gilmore," she said steadily enough, "that under the circumstances you should not come here."

"It was the circumstances that emboldened me to come," answered Gilmore; "the disgraceful way in which your daughter was treated under my roof must be my excuse,"

"Still it is unwise—my daughter is only a young girl, and I cannot permit——"

"Mrs. Loftus," interrupted Gilmore, as Mrs. Loftus hesitated and paused, "I am sure you cannot suspect me of anything but honorable motives in coming here—I came to ask your daughter to be my wife."

A little startled exclamation burst from Nancy's lips at this announcement, which certainly had not been made to her; and Mrs. Loftus's delicate face flushed deeply.

"It is a great honor to Nancy," she said falteringly; "but your mother——"

"My mother has nothing whatever to do with my actions, and the way she treated Nancy was enough to disgust any man. In fact, there is just one request I have to make, if Nancy here will honor me by accepting me?" and Gilmore ardently caught Nancy's little hand in his. "And this request is that my mother should know nothing of our engagement until after our marriage—which I hope Nancy will permit to be very soon?"

"I think that I had better leave you two to settle your own affairs," smiled Mrs. Loftus. "Thank you, Lord Gilmore, for your generous and noble conduct to my child."

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"Well, have you turned him out?" asked Aunt Fannie, eagerly, as Mrs. Loftus re-entered the dining-room.

"Hush, Fannie, you do not understand," answered the proud, fond mother, whose dark eyes were wet with tears, "he came to ask Nancy to be his wife."

"I will never believe it," began Aunt Fannie, positively.

"It is a fact, nevertheless," said Mrs. Loftus, with mild triumph, "and their marriage will take place very soon, I believe—Lord Gilmore has behaved very nobly."

Aunt Fannie was speechless for some minutes after this, and sat with her eyes fixed with a stony expression of utter astonishment; then presently she roused herself.

"It is a very odd thing," she said nodding her head sagely, "but do you remember, Lucy, what I said to you about Nancy, when it was first fixed that she had to go to Lady Gilmore's?"

"No, Fannie, what did you say?"

"I said that girl was sure to make a good match—there, and you see I have been right, though of course I never thought of her entering the peerage—it's just wonderful, and her poor father would have been a proud and happy man if he had lived to see this day!"

"We ought all to be very, very thankful," said Mrs. Loftus, gently, and no words were ever more truly spoken from a woman's heart.

And in the golden days that followed, Mrs. Loftus had no reason to change her first opinion of Gilmore. He almost lived at the little house in West Hampstead, and seemed never happy when Nancy was out of his sight. She was his last new toy in fact—the sweetest, the dearest one—he told himself, and he was really and truly in love with her, and he did not regret the words he had spoken to her mother, almost without consideration, which had plighted his troth to Nancy. He had seen, in fact, that he would lose her unless he married her, and he was ready to make any sacrifice rather than do this.

And Nancy? She was a blithe and happy maiden in these days, with her handsome lover by her side, and a bright future lying before her, athwart which no shadow seemed to fall. Their engagement by Gilmore's wish was kept a profound secret from all but the members of the family, and even when Lady Blenkinsop wrote a most severe letter to Nancy—having heard Lady Gilmore's story—by Gilmore's request she made no reply to it.

He treated a letter which he received from his mother in the same fashion. In this letter Lady Gilmore implored her son not to become "entangled with a young woman whose character was of so degraded and low a nature, that she would actually plan meetings with gentlemen in dimly-lighted passages," and so on; and she entreated him most earnestly to return to Wrothsley.

These letters however had one effect, they made Gilmore most anxious to be married immediately, "to prevent any

more worry," he told Nancy, and they made Nancy and Mrs. Loftus also desirous that Nancy's real position with Lord Gilmore should be known. Gilmore had other and private reasons also for haste and secrecy about his marriage, and therefore just two weeks after Nancy had been so ignominiously sent home from Wrothsley, very quietly one early morning, Hugh Gifford, third Lord Gilmore, was married to Nancy Loftus, in the Parish Church.

Aunt Fannie behaved most generously on the occasion, and presented one hundred pounds to the happy bride, and her bridegroom's lavish hand provided her with everything she could require. But none in the street or the neighborhood knew that the marriage was going to take place except the clergyman who married them, until it was over, nay until the bride and bridegroom were actually gone.

But before he left, Gilmore wrote a letter to his mother to tell her that all her words and warnings had been in vain.

"Dear mother" (he inscribed in his large scrawling handwriting), "I did not reply to your letter before because you used in it certain very unjust expressions of the girl to whom I was then engaged, and to whom I am now married. I was married this morning to Nancy Loftus, and I mean to take her abroad for a year or more, and I hope by the time of our return you will be reconciled to my choice. I for one am willing to let bygones be bygones, and I think we had all better bury the hatchet; but you see you did not act very wisely in turning Nancy out of the house, when she will return to it as its mistress. Please keep the diamonds I gave her safely until she requires them. With love to the children in which Nancy joins. I remain, yours sincerely, "GILMORE."

"There, will that do, my little one?" he said, handing this letter to Nancy after he had written it, and we may be sure her smiling rosy lips thanked him for his words.

They left Mrs. Loftus's house half-an-hour afterwards, and the letter left too, and speeded on its way until it reached the great house which Sir Thomas Gifford had built in his pride, before he became the first Lord Gilmore, and where the second lord had lived and died, and where his children had been born. And it reached the hand of

Lady Gilmore, who seized it with passionate haste, recognising the handwriting of her son. But as she read the words it contained—words that crushed all her hopes to dust—a shriek so loud, so terrible, that the lofty roof rang, burst from her writhing lips, and utterances wild, self-accusing, and despairing, escaped her tongue.

She walked up and down the room like a mad woman ; she wrung her hands, she cried aloud—

“My sin has found me out ! My sin has found me out !”

But suddenly she stopped ; flung up her arms, and fell forward, stricken, paralyzed, on the floor. The violent emotions of her heart had shattered their frail tenement.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CONFESSION.

THEY lifted up the poor lady and carried her to her bed, with altered features, twisted form and silent tongue. They summoned doctors and sent for her priest, to whom she was wont to confess her sins and sorrows, always however keeping back one secret. But now this secret haunted her sick bed, and grew darker and blacker in her sight.

Lady Gilmore was dangerously ill for many days after this, yet when they spoke before her of sending for her son, she ever made a mute sign of dissent. The story of his marriage was now known, and the people said Gilmore had broken his mother's heart, and old stories were revived, old scandals whispered.

Lady Blenkinsop, when she heard that Lady Gilmore had been stricken with paralysis, after reading her son's letter announcing his marriage, drove over to Wrothsley, partly in the hope that she would be able to reconcile her to his choice, by telling her that Colonel Loftus' family were of the highest respectability. But the invalid refused to see her former friend, just as she refused to receive the old woman from Gateford Manor House, who went away grumbling because she was debarred from speaking the hard words she had meant to say.

And it was strange that the children whom Lady Gil-

more had neglected in her overpowering affection for her son, now seemed the only consolation left to her. The little fair-haired twin-girls used to play about her room, and prattle to her by the hour, while the mother's dark eyes rested fondly on their faces. She saw also Father Hayward occasionally, who for the last ten years had been her spiritual adviser and confessor, and who now came to pray earnestly by her side.

One day when he arrived, a note sheet was put into his hand, on which the stricken lady had inscribed a few almost illegible words.

"Father, pray that I may regain my speech," read the priest, with genuine compassion and sympathy. He was an earnest man this, a sincere and devout follower of the creeds of his Church, and he knew and could read the wayward heart of this daughter of his faith, he believed, as an open book. But when he understood the pathetic words she had scrawled with her cramped and stiffened hand; when he saw the eager desire for speech expressed in her restless eyes, it dawned upon his acute mind that Lady Gilmore had some especial motive for her prayer.

"I will," he said, in his ringing, sympathetic voice; "may God in His mercy grant, my daughter, that your tongue may be loosed."

And the good man's prayers were answered. Gradually the violence of the paralysis diminished, and gradually speech came back to her; at first mumbling and uncertain, and then more defined and clear. But more than three months passed away before Lady Gilmore could converse with any amount of distinctness. By this time also she was able to be wheeled in a Bath-chair along the terrace, yet she still positively refused to receive any visitors but her priest.

But one day in the early spring-time Father Hayward received an especial message requesting him to go to Wrothsley at his earliest convenience. He went, and found Lady Gilmore sitting up in her boudoir, looking stronger and more erect than he had seen her since her illness.

"I am glad to see you looking so much better," he said pleasantly.

"I am well in body but ill in mind, Father," she answered, as she returned his greeting.

"Nay," he said, seating himself by her side, "the ill-

ness of your mind will pass away, I trust, with the bodily one ; your speech is almost now quite restored, for which great blessing we ought indeed to be most thankful."

"It has been given back to me," replied Lady Gilmore with twitching lips and tremulous words, "for a purpose, Father. I have a confession to make to you—the confession of a great sin."

"My daughter do not excite yourself thus ; your inner life has been known to me for many years, and its failings and follies have been blotted out by good deeds, and ever generous help to the afflicted of our faith. Wait until your health is completely restored before referring to any exciting topic."

"It will never be completely restored, Father, and I have no longer any time to waste ; I have waited patiently, and prayed earnestly that God would give me power to cleanse my soul of a great sin, for now I see its blackness, and in His great mercy He has done so, and I pray you to listen."

Father Hayward gravely bowed his head, for he perceived now that some strong and powerful motive was dictating Lady Gilmore's solemn words.

"I am ever ready to listen, my daughter," he said, and to comfort if I can ; but do not, I entreat you, forget your recent illness."

"No, I shall try to keep calm. Father, I must go back to the early days of my wedded life—when—when I loved Lord Gilmore with the jealous, exacting love of a woman devoted to him ; of a woman who had married him not for his wealth, as he sometimes taunted me with, but for himself alone ! You know who I was, and the old blood which flows in my veins?"

Again Father Hayward gravely bowed his head, thinking sadly enough of the vain boast from these quivering lips.

"It was not so with him as you know also," went on Lady Gilmore, "the Giffords had been but recently ennobled, and in our early married days my husband was most anxious that an heir should be born to us. An heir was born," she continued with increasing agitation. "A puny, mis-shapen babe, and when my husband first saw him he was bitterly disappointed and said some hard words, though he well knew their injustice."

Father Hayward now bit his lips, and a look of great anxiety stole into his gray and thoughtful eyes.

“We had a quarrel, too, about in what faith the child should be reared; my lord cared nothing really about these things, but he had been brought up a Protestant, and he said his child should be brought up one too, and my tears and entreaties were alike unavailing. Then a little more than a year afterwards another son was born—a beautiful boy this time, strong, sturdy, and fine-featured like his father, and Gilmore was proud of the child, and openly said he wished he had been the heir. And one night, while the two children were in their baths, he unexpectedly came into the nursery, and I saw his eyes fall with disgust on the form of the poor little eldest born. We had tried to keep it a secret from him—Nurse Brewster and I—but Gerard, the heir, was a hunchback, and this was the first time my husband actually knew this. He looked from one to the other—I see him yet—and shrugged his shoulders.

“‘A nice heir you have given me, truly! Why the brat’s a hunchback?’

“He patted the head of the other child, and then went away, with a frown on his brow, and after he was gone Nurse Brewster, who was a north-country woman and had been reared on our property, said—

“‘It would be the best thing that could happen if this poor little fellow were to go to a better place, I think. I fear my lord will never take to him.’ And she lifted Gerard out of his bath as she spoke.

“I did not speak for a moment; I, too, was comparing the two children, and as I did so something evil seemed to whisper a subtle temptation in my ear——”

“Not, surely——” cried Father Hayward, starting to his feet with a look of horror.

“Shall I tell you what the tempter said?” continued Lady Gilmore, passionately. “Remember that I loved my husband, and was jealous of him, and most eager to keep his love! He said in my ear, ‘this child stands between you two; your lord loathes him, is ashamed of him, and will learn to hate you also for his sake. Why not put him out of the way? Why not let the handsome boy become the heir?’”

“My daughter, surely you did not listen to the base suggestion?”

“Not then, but again and again the thought came back to me, for Gilmore said hard and bitter words to me on

the subject, and often wished the child would die. He was delicate—the poor mis-shapen one—and gradually the temptation assumed form and shape in my mind. We would take little Gerard away, nurse and I, and pretend to his father he was dead, and bring him up in our faith, for Nurse Brewster is a Catholic also; and I told myself in doing this I was thinking of the eternal salvation of the child, and so blinded my poor reason to a great injustice.”

“And you carried out this scheme?”

“We carried it out to the bitter end. Gerard was delicate, as I told you, and one day I asked the doctor who attended him, if he thought the northern air—my native air—would be of any service to him, and the doctor answered that it would probably greatly strengthen him. I told my husband this, and he replied with a biting jest.

“‘I wish you would give him change of air enough for me never to see him again,’ he said. ‘I cannot bear to look on him.’

“These words stung me, and I made an angry passionate answer, and without seeing Lord Gilmore again I left the house, only taking little Gerard and Nurse Brewster with me. I left a few indignant lines for my husband, telling him that, for a time at least, my child’s unnatural father should be spared the sight of his son. We were living here—at Wrothsley—when this quarrel took place, and I went up to our house in town for a few days, and whilst there, took Nurse Brewster into my confidence, and offered her a large sum and a good and regular income to aid me in my deceit. She was afraid at first, but the temptation of the money proved too strong for her, and she finally entered completely into my scheme.”

“But—but you surely did not injure the child?” asked Father Hayward, with agitation.

“No, no, I would not have hurt a hair of his head! I told myself he was unfit to move in the world; unfit to be his father’s heir, and that I would bring him up to the priesthood, and that a holy peaceful life would be the happiest for him, and that my husband would love me more when he believed him to be dead, and when he looked on the handsome boy of whom he was so proud. So we arranged it all—we went down to a lonely village on the coast, washed by the Northern Sea, where we were complete strangers—and we carried with us a little lead-lined coffin;

and from this place a few days later I wrote to my husband to tell him that little Gerard had taken scarlet fever, and was dangerously ill. He answered it would 'be a good thing if the poor hunchback never got well, for he would only cumber the earth if he did.' "

"And does this boy still live?"

"I will tell you. We had taken a small furnished house, and no one knew anything of us, for I had brought no servants but Nurse Brewster; and a week after we arrived at Scarley I wrote to Lord Gilmore to tell him he had got his wish, and that his poor baby son was dead. 'He is already in his little coffin,' I added, 'so there can be no infection;' and I asked if I might bring him home. To this my husband answered that the coffin must be screwed down at once on account of Hugh—the other boy; and he directed me then to bring the dead child to Wrothsley, and agreed to meet me at a certain train."

"And you did this?" asked Father Hayward, who was listening to Lady Gilmore's startling words with strong but suppressed excitement.

"I did," she answered, with a faltering tongue, though she was struggling to be calm. "I started on my homeward journey alone, taking with me, hidden away, the little empty coffin, which Nurse Brewster had securely fastened down; and I left Nurse Brewster and the child at Scarley, and travelled quietly up to town, and when I arrived there I got a carriage, after telegraphing to the servants to expect me; and, while in that carriage, for the first time, I uncovered the little coffin, and it was carried into the house at Eaton Square, and no one ever suspected I was committing a cruel wrong."

"But the nurse? How did you account for her not being with you?"

"We had settled all that—she had taken the fever—she was too ill to travel, and I wrote this to my husband too. This frightened him more than ever about infection, and he ordered another coffin to be made in which the one I brought was enclosed, and I watched them fasten this down also, and the next day, accompanied by some of the servants, I went to Wrothsley, and at the station Gilmore was waiting."

"And he never suspected?"

"Not for one moment. The little coffin, bearing the age and date of the poor child's supposed death, was

placed in a hearse and conveyed to the private chapel attached to the house here, and was buried in the family vault, where only the first Lord Gilmore then lay, though—now my husband—”

Here Lady Gilmore suddenly broke down, and sobs she could not suppress burst from her trembling lips.

“I entreat you to compose yourself,” said Father Hayward, earnestly. “Consider, my daughter, that you alone can repair the wrong you did, that without your evidence it never can be undone.”

“I will try,” she wept; “but—but it is all so bitter—to—think that the one for whose sake I did it at all—the son I loved too well, too well, should—have broken my heart!”

“Confessed and repented sins can be blotted out,” said the father, gently. “You wish now that right and justice should be done?”

“I do, I do! I wish now that this other son—the son I wronged—should take his rightful name and place in the world. That bitter birthright—his poor crooked form—was no fault of his, and Nurse Brewster tells me he has grown up strong and well.”

“How has he been educated?” asked the priest, gravely.

“He has been well educated at a Catholic seminary, but his personal defect stood in the way of his entering the priesthood. He has always passed as Nurse Brewster’s son, and about four years ago—when he was twenty-one—I advanced money to establish him on a farm, situated close to Scarley, I believe, and his reputed mother lives with him there.”

“And have you ever seen him since you parted with him as a babe?”

“Yes, but only rarely; I was afraid to do so for the other’s sake. I saw him last when he was about fifteen, ten years ago now.”

“And you are sure this woman has not deceived you? That this young man is actually your son?”

“I am as sure as that I am myself alive. Father, it is a strange thing, but this boy whom his father despised and hated, has inherited every feature of his face. He is a hunchback, and but for that Nurse Brewster has often told me that his likeness to her late lord is something marvellous.”

Father Hayward was silent for a few moments ; he stood with his eyes cast down thinking what it was best to do.

“And this Nurse Brewster would give direct evidence in the event of a trial, I suppose?” he said, at last. “She would speak the truth?”

“She dare do nothing else,” answered Lady Gilmore, a sudden flush rising to her pale face.

“We cannot tell ; what other evidence could we bring forward?”

“What other evidence !” repeated Lady Gilmore, passionately. “Is my word not enough? But if other evidence is wanted, let them go to the family vault, and open the empty little coffin which lies there !”

“That, no doubt, is a strong point—but, my daughter, you have borne enough to-day—take some rest now, with this consolation to comfort you, that by this confession you have eased your soul of a heavy burden.”

“A heavy burden too great almost for me to bear !” repeated Lady Gilmore excitedly. “I bore it for his sake—I should have died silent—if he had not acted as he has done.

“Then let us be thankful that good has come out of evil, and may this stranger son prove the comfort and help of your declining days.”

Other words he spoke to her which need not be written here ; words of peace and pardon, for the good man's heart sorrowed for her, knowing well that the idol of her life was shattered, and all her earthly pride laid low. The world was nothing to her now she told him, and the one hope left to her was to cleanse her soul of this grievous sin.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE YOUNG FARMER.

THREE days later (Lady Gilmore having in the meanwhile made a deposition of her confession before a magistrate), Father Hayward started for the village by the northern sea-board, where the late Lord Gilmore's legitimate heir had been hidden away and reared. The Father

was not only a good and pious man, but an ardent and devoted upholder of the tenets of his Church, and the knowledge that this young man had been brought up a Roman Catholic made him doubly anxious that his rights should be at once fully established. The great wealth of the House of Gilmore was also present in his mind as he travelled northwards, and he was eager that its power and influence should be directed to what he naturally deemed the most righteous channels. He went armed with a letter to her son from Lady Gilmore, and also one to Nurse Brewster, and he reached Scarley on a bright morning in the spring-time, a pale, white-flecked blue sky spanning the wide, green, rolling sea.

An old world place this, with the fishermen's cottages perched near the edge of the beetling crags towering around the little bay. A quaint place, smelling of the sea and the sea-fish, with the great nets spread out to dry on the green banks, and the girls in their neat print bedgowns, and short blue skirts flitting about, jesting and singing as they go. Here and there a better house—the parson's, the doctor's—but for the most part the village is made up of the humble dwellings of the poor. Father Hayward walked on, inquiring his way as he went of bronzed, stalwart men, the children of the sea, who had been reared on its cliffs, and earned their bread on its waters, and oftentimes found their graves in its silent depths.

“Crag-side farmhouse?” one of them answered, in his broad Northern tongue to the Father's inquiries. “Where the young hunchback lives? Yon's the house, over in the fields there;” and he pointed with his brown strong hand towards some wide, green, spreading pastures and fields of sprouting corn.

Father Hayward courteously thanked him and proceeded on his way, crossing the hilly ground immediately at the back of the village, and then entering the narrow pathways, intercepted with rustic stiles, which led through the fields on the way to the comfortable-looking square farmhouse which had been pointed out to him.

He passed through the first stile, and was nearing the second when he perceived what appeared at first sight to be two rural lovers sitting on it. They did not see him approaching, and the young man suddenly tried to put his arm round the girl's slim waist. But she pushed him away with a smile and a blush, however, and jumped

lightly off the stile, followed a moment later by her swain.

They were now face to face with the priest, and they saw him, though still some yards apart from him, and they instantly drew a little further away from each other, and the girl cast down her blue eyes. She was pretty, fresh-colored, and fair, and was dressed much in the same fashion as the other young women in the village, though perhaps a shade more trimly. Father Hayward glanced at her as he passed them, and then looked at her companion, and as he did so he slightly started.

The young man was a hunchback. Not one second did the father doubt, as his acute gaze fell on the handsome, smiling face before him, whose son this was. Father Hayward had known the second Lord Gilmore and remembered well the laughing, careless, somewhat reckless glance of his hazel eyes, and the full lips shaded by the thick brown moustache, and the bright brown hair. He might have been looking now on the dead man's face, so remarkable was the likeness between sire and son. But Lord Gilmore's tall, straight and powerful frame was lacking. This young man, though not little was but of moderate height, and was round-shouldered and hump-backed. But he looked strong and well, and his complexion was clear and sun-burned, and he had the expression of a man on fairly good terms with himself, and his dress—that of a young farmer—displayed a certain amount of foppishness and care.

“Can you kindly tell me if a Mrs. Brewster lives in that house?” asked Father Hayward addressing him, as they passed each other, and the young man at once stopped, and touched his cap.

“Why, that's my mother, sir,” he said, pleasantly ; “do you wish to see her?”

“I have a message for her,” answered the priest, “shall I find her at home?”

“Quite sure, sir ; she rarely goes out. If you'll excuse me a minute I'll turn and go with you to the house.”

The Father gravely bowed his head in acceptance of this proposition, and the young man ran on a step or two to overtake the girl who had walked on when the priest had addressed him. They exchanged a few whispered words, and then the young farmer returned.

“And so you are Mrs. Brewster's son?” said Father Hayward, looking at him intently.

“Yes, sir, I am Gerard Brewster,” he answered smiling, “her only son.”

“And you have always lived here?”

“Yes, except when I was at school, you know; but not at Crag-side farmhouse, but in the village.”

“And that young woman?”

“Oh, she’s an old friend,” said Gerard, with a blush and a laugh; “I have known her since she was a little girl.”

“And you farm this place?”

“Yes, I’m a farmer; we took the farm, mother and I, four years ago now.”

“Do you like the life?”

“It’s not a bad one as things go—not a money-making one though?” And again young Gerard laughed.

By this time they had reached the garden-gate in front of the farmhouse, which Gerard opened for the Father to pass, and together they walked down the neatly-kept gravelled pathway between the flower-borders, which were bright with the spring blossoms.

The house itself was a most substantial one. Square, with a long sloping tiled roof, a heavy stone portico and thick walls. And from without you saw the comfortable-looking dark red damask curtains within, and the neat white blinds. Everything, indeed, gave you the impression that a well-to-do family lived in this quiet spot, standing amid the green fields with the distant sound of the murmuring sea breaking on rock and shore.

It passed through Father Hayward’s thoughtful mind as he looked around and then glanced at his companion, that the life here was perhaps a happier and more contented one for this young man than the life which lay before him amid luxury and rank.

“But it is his birthright, his duty,” the next moment the good Father reflected, remembering the interests of his Church. He therefore followed Gerard into the house, who led the way into a well-furnished room, where the table was prepared for the early dinner.

“I’ll go and seek mother,” said Gerard, with that pleasant smile of his.

“His manner is better than I expected,” thought Father Hayward, as he disappeared; “no doubt he will worthily fill his new position.”

But what would the reverend father have thought if

he could, unseen, have followed Gerard's footsteps? The young man went first into the kitchen to seek his supposed mother, but was told she had gone upstairs to wash her hands in preparation for the mid-day meal. Thither he followed her, and rapped at Mrs. Brewster's bedroom door, and, having been told to enter, went quickly in.

"I say, mother," he began, "there is one of those blackcoated gentlemen downstairs, and of course he's come to get something or other out of us ; it is a perfect nuisance."

"Do you mean a priest, Gerard?" answered Mrs. Brewster.

She was a gray-haired woman of some sixty-five or perhaps sixty-seven years old ; dressed well and respectably, and her features were good, and her expression determined.

"Yes, a priest, of course," replied Gerard, with a shrug of his round shoulders. "What between the Vicar here and our people, they never let us alone ; please tell the reverend father that bankruptcy is staring us in the face ;" and he laughed.

"You should not speak so, Gerard, of the good fathers ; of course it is absurd of the Vicar coming to us."

"They are all the same," answered the graceless Gerard, with a merry glance of his bright hazel eyes.

Mrs. Brewster looked at him, and smiled too, and then patted his shoulders affectionately.

"You are a bad boy," she said indulgently. "Let me see—where have I laid my purse?"

The purse was lying on the dressing-table, and Gerard snatched it up with a light laugh.

"What have you got in it?" he said, jokingly. "Four pounds. Mother, I'll only leave one and the silver, or of course you'll give it all away."

He put the three pounds into his pocket as he spoke, and Mrs. Brewster only shook her head.

"I'll give you the money back when the priest is gone," went on Gerard ; "won't you be glad then to get it?"

Again Mrs. Brewster shook her head, and then went to the looking-glass and adjusted her neat, matronly cap, and having given this attention to her personal appearance, she presently descended the staircase, and entered the dining-room, where Father Hayward was standing.

She bowed gravely and respectfully as she went into the room, and the father also returned her salutation very gravely.

“You are Mrs. Brewster?” said Father Hayward.

“Yes, your reverence,” she answered.

“I have a message for you,” went on Father Hayward, yet more gravely; “a message from Lady Gilmore.”

The woman’s face suddenly flushed, and then grew pale.

“From Lady Gilmore!” she repeated, as if in great confusion and surprise.

“Yes; the poor lady has been very ill—nigh unto death—and she has repented and confessed the great wrong that she and you did to her innocent son.”

A half-cry broke from Mrs. Brewster’s pallid lips, and she grasped the back of a chair near her as if for support.

“I—I—do not understand,” she faltered out.

“Yes, my daughter, you understand too well!” said the priest reprovingly and solemnly; “the young man I have just seen is no son of yours; is in truth the eldest son of the late Lord Gilmore, and for twenty-four years you have carried on a base deception.”

“It—was my lady,” gasped Mrs. Brewster.

“Yes, she yielded to a vain and foolish temptation, and it has recoiled upon her own heart with great bitterness. The son for whose sake she robbed her first-born has married against her will, and altogether led a life far from creditable to him. But she has repented of her sin, and I pray, my daughter, that you also will confess and repent having aided her in a grievous wrong.”

Mrs. Brewster seemed quite overcome. She was a strong and healthful woman of her age, but she now sank down on a chair as if unable to stand.

“What did she say?” at length she faltered out.

Then Father Hayward told her the whole story; told her of the little empty coffin in the family vault at Wrothslay, which bore the name of Gerard Gifford; and how this had been opened in the presence of himself and a magistrate; and he told her, also, that Lady Gilmore had written a letter to her, with her poor cramped hands, of which he was the bearer.

“And I have one for her son, also,” he continued. “and she wishes him to go to her at once, so that she may bless him, and learn to love him before she dies.”

Mrs. Brewster sat pale and silent as the priest detailed the overwhelming evidence of the fraud she had assisted to commit.

Can they," she asked at last, "do anything to me?"

"Legally you could be punished; but the case is unlikely to go into court, as the young man who unjustly bears the name of Lord Gilmore would have no chance of winning it against the direct evidence of his mother and yourself."

"But if I did not give mine?" said Mrs. Brewster slowly.

"My daughter, you are old," answered the priest sternly; "dare you face the inevitable moment of death; the awful judgment beyond the grave, with a lie on your lips, where no lie will indeed avail you?"

Mrs. Brewster was visibly moved by these solemn words.

"Do not hesitate between good and evil," went on the father earnestly; "for long years have you lived a life of sin and deceit, but you have time to repent and be forgiven. Cleanse your conscience of this great burden, my daughter, and when you lie on your death-bed, be able to look up at the Holy Symbol of our faith, not in fear and trembling, but in faith and trust."

Still Mrs. Brewster hesitated. For twenty-four years she had carried this secret in her own bosom, and spoken of it to none. She had confessed to her priest, but like her lady this sin had never passed her lips. She was fond, too, of her adopted son, and from his delicate babyhood to his stalwart manhood had watched over him with the most devoted care. It was like rending all her past life in twain, to give up the child she had reared even to his own mother.

"They will take him away from me, they will take his love away," was passing through her mind, and the thought was full of bitterness.

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY GILMORE'S LETTER.

IN the meanwhile young Gerard was becoming very impatient at his supposed mother's lengthened interview with the priest. It was his ordinary dinner hour for one thing, and he was blessed with a healthful appetite, and

for another (seemingly by the strange laws of heredity) he alike lacked faith and reverence.

"He is his father's very son," how often had Mrs. Brewster thought, as she listened to his careless words and looked on his handsome face. He had, too, a gay, pleasure-loving disposition, and a certain amount of personal vanity, which in his case was somewhat remarkable; the late Lord Gilmore also having been not a little proud of his own good looks.

He therefore soon grew tired of waiting for Father Hayward to take his departure, and felt no scruple about going into the dining-room, in the hope of hurrying him away. But no sooner did he enter the room than he saw something very unusual had occurred.

His mother was sitting with clasped hands, looking pale—almost rigid—with an intensity of expression on her colorless face that he had never seen there before; while in front of her stood the father, with upraised hand, pouring out words of admonition and warning.

Gerard glanced from one to the other in surprise, and as he did so, after a moment's thought, Father Hayward addressed him.

"You have entered on a strange scene," he said, "for I came here on a strange purpose, and I trust you will now add your entreaties to mine to induce this woman, whom all your life you have believed to be your mother, now to speak the truth."

"I don't understand what you mean," answered Gerard sharply, and his face flushed; "this is my mother, and I don't like to hear her spoken of in that way."

As Gerard said this he went up and put his hand on Mrs. Brewster's shoulder, who, suddenly, as she received this token of affection, burst into a passion of tears.

"I'm the only mother he ever had!" she sobbed. "The only one who ever loved him!"

"My son, she is not your mother," said the priest, solemnly. "Your mother is Lady Gilmore, of Wrothsley, of whom you may have heard, and this woman was your nurse, and she and your real mother in your infancy schemed together to rob you of your just birthright."

"Lady Gilmore of Wrothsley!" repeated Gerard, in the utmost surprise.

"Yes, you are the late Lord Gilmore's eldest son."

Gerard looked at Mrs. Brewster, who had now covered

her face with her hands and was sobbing aloud, and then at Father Hayward.

"I cannot understand it," he said; "if this be true, what possible motive could Lady Gilmore have?"

"A vain and foolish one," answered Father Hayward; "you were born with a personal defect—a defect of the spine—and your father was angry that his heir should bear this birthmark, and taunted your mother with it in his injustice. And to keep his affection, as she supposed, she hid you away and pretended to her husband you were dead, and your second brother, Hugh, who was well-formed and handsome, was brought up as the heir, while you were reared by Mrs. Brewster, your nurse."

Every word of this speech stung Gerard's vain heart to the quick. His face flushed, and his hands trembled, and he drew himself up in mute protest against the reflection cast upon his form.

"You have outgrown it, my dear," wept Mrs. Brewster, who understood him, "there is little or nothing the matter with you now."

"Then—is all this true?" asked Gerard slowly, after a moment's pause. "Is—Lady Gilmore really my mother?"

Once more Mrs. Brewster hesitated.

"My daughter, you have virtually admitted the truth of my statement," said Father Hayward.

"If it is true, you had better say so," said Gerard; "and all I can say if it is, it was a disgraceful thing."

"Gerard! It was your mother!" cried Mrs. Brewster, unable to bear this reproach, and starting to her feet. "I did not want to do it—I prayed and begged her not. Yes, it is true," she went on passionately, flinging herself on her knees before him, and seizing one of his hands. "You were a weak and sickly babe, and my lord was angry because the younger boy was strong, and he was hard and cruel about it to my lady, and they had a bitter quarrel, and my lady took you and me away with her to the house in London, and when we were there, she persuaded me to help her to deceive my lord, and tell him you had died of fever!"

"It was disgraceful!" cried Gerard roughly, trying to pull away his hand, but the poor woman clung to it.

"I have nursed you and watched over you for twenty-five years," she wept. "But for me you would never have been what you are now—strong and well—Oh, forgive me, Gerard!"

He had a kind, if a vain, heart, and after a moment's hesitation he put his other hand on her gray head.

"Well, it can't be helped now," he said. "Come, get up. I don't like to see you kneeling there."

"Then will you forgive me?" she asked humbly.

"It seems to me that my other mother, not you, was the one to blame. But why has she changed her mind, sir?" he added, turning round to Father Hayward, after he had raised Mrs. Brewster up. "Why does she want to acknowledge me now if she was ashamed of me before, though I don't see that she had any reason, certainly."

"My son, great grief and trouble has come to her," answered the good Father; "the son she preferred before you, and of whom she made an earthly idol, after leading a discreditable life, married against her will, and when she learnt this it seemed to her that the very hand of God had been stretched out to punish her for the wrong she had done you. She was stricken with paralysis and lay speechless many days, and she asked me to pray that her tongue might be loosed, and after a while, by God's grace, her speech was restored to her, and the first use she made of it was to confess her grievous fault."

"And—my father?" asked Gerard, not unmoved.

"Lord Gilmore has been dead four years, and at his death your brother Hugh assumed the title, and now bears it. But it is justly yours—you are now Lord Gilmore."

It is almost impossible to describe the mingled feelings with which the young man heard these words. He grew excited, his face flushed, and his heart beat fast. The change was so sudden, so great, and so unexpected, that he seemed scarcely able to realize it.

"And the other fellow," he said, at length, "how will he like it?"

The good father could scarcely restrain the smile which stole over his grave features at this naive remark.

"Your brother, I trust, will see the justice and propriety of giving up a position which should never have been his without protest. At all events without dragging your mother's name into a law court. But should he resist your claim, it will be your plain duty, and Lady Gilmore's duty also, to uphold it."

Again Gerard was silent; he stood there moving himself uneasily; thinking thoughts that had not yet had time to shape themselves into full reality.

“It only now rests with me,” continued Father Hayward, “to give to you the letter which your mother, Lady Gilmore, entrusted to my care. This is it, my son, and I pray by God’s blessing it will be the first link to unite your heart to hers, after your long severance.”

Gerard took the letter that the priest held to him in his trembling hand.

“Perhaps you would rather read it alone,” said the Father, considerately, who noticed how agitated the young man before him really was, and Gerard eagerly availed himself of this proposal, and at once quitted the room.

He went up the somewhat narrow, though well-carpeted staircase of the farmhouse with hasty steps, and when he reached the first landing hurried to his own bedroom, which was situated in the front of the dwelling. And when he got there he first shut the door, and then tore open the letter he had received from the Father, which was sealed, the wax being stamped with the armorial bearings of the House of Gilmore. It was headed inside “To my eldest son, Gerard,” and the text ran thus :—

“My son, ere you read this the good father will have told you who you really are, and how I, in my sin and folly, strove to deprive you of your just birthright. But God Himself put out His hand to punish me, and I have fallen prostrate before His will. You were born, my poor son, with another birthright as well as your father’s name, and a bitter, bitter one it seemed to me. Your father was cruel and unjust to me because you were not straight and shapely like himself and the other son, for whose sake I wronged you. Gerard, this other son, whom I have loved too well, too well, has been made the whip wherewith to scourge me. I will not write of him here; it is enough to tell you that his conduct has made me see mine in its true light, and I bow my head to bear the punishment which is my due. Do not blame the only mother you have ever known—Nurse Brewster—for this good woman did not wish to aid me in the deception which we practised on your father, until I over-persuaded her to do so, and no mother could have reared you with greater tenderness and care than she has done. She tells me you have grown strong and well, and you must not forget you owe this to her. I have written to her, and

she will no doubt fully confirm the truth of my words. And now, my son, there but remains for me to ask your forgiveness, and to implore you to come to me, so that I may bless you before I die. And do not think that only when I learnt your brother's unworthiness that my conscience stung me! God is my witness how for years and years I tried to stifle its dumb voice, yet it ever pursued me. Now—stricken as I am—I see things more clearly; see how vainly we strive to follow our own weak plans, if they are opposed to the Almighty's. I will write no more, but remain your sorrowing, affectionate mother,

“DOROTHY GILMORE.”

“P.S.—In Father Hayward, the bearer of this, you can safely confide all your present and future arrangements. He is a most worthy and excellent man, and a pious and devoted priest of our Holy Church.

“D. G.”

Gerard read this long letter to the end with the most strange and varying emotions throbbing in his heart, but his first action after doing so told that personal vanity was one of the strongest feelings of his being.

He went, in fact, up to the looking-glass, and stood trying to see the effect of his own figure at the back. There were no cheval glasses at Cragside farmhouse, nor even hand glasses. Mrs. Brewster, indeed, with rare tact for one of her station, had always tried to hide from the son of her love the fact of his bodily deformity as much as possible, and Gerard was proud of his handsome face, and extremely angry if any allusion was ever made before him about his figure. True, rude boys at school had sometimes called him “humpbacked,” and rough lads in the village, who were jealous of his money and fine clothing had sometimes jibed at him, but mostly in his absence, for Gerard, who was brave and strong in spite of his misfortune, had turned round on one unmannerly young knave and knocked him down for some unseemly words. After this, people did not care much to interfere with Gerard Brewster (as he was called), and as Gerard was generous and even lavish with his money, for anyone with his characteristic—in village and city alike—there are always flatterers to be found.

But his mother's letter, and Father Hayward's words,

had brought his bitter birthright most vividly and painfully before him. They made him realize for the first time that he must be shaped differently to his ordinary fellow-men, and the idea was very galling to his heart. Still as he stood gazing at himself anxiously, he saw nothing to be very much dissatisfied with. His well made brown velvet coat and waistcoat were fitted so as to greatly disguise, in front, at least, that there was anything the matter with him; and he saw, too, the finely cut features, the bright hazel eyes, and the thick brown moustache and hair.

"I have nearly outgrown it, I suppose," he thought presently; and then his mind turned to the great change of fortune which had come to him; to the new life of wealth and pleasure lying glittering before his half-bewildered gaze!

By-and-bye, however, he remembered the good Father, and returned to the sitting room for the purpose of seeing after his comforts. He found Father Hayward alone, for Mrs. Brewster had retired to indulge her bitter grief at the prospect of losing her adopted son.

"You will stay and dine with us, sir, will you not?" said Gerard, and the father consented, and during the comfortable and well-cooked meal which followed, the priest was quietly endeavoring to read the character of the young man whose future had now become of such importance in his eyes.

Gerard talked pleasantly and well, but the subject of his inheritance was not, of course, mentioned before the waiting-maid. Mrs. Brewster had declined to appear, in truth was too much overcome to do so, but the good Father marked with satisfaction that Gerard did not forget her. He sent her up some soup, and poured out a glass of wine for her; and altogether showed both kindness and consideration for the woman whom he had so long regarded as his mother. After dinner was over, the two men went out together, and Father Hayward then urged Gerard to return with him to Wrothsley.

"Lady Gilmore wishes you to do so," he said; "and your new position cannot be too soon established. When could you leave here?"

Gerard hesitated.

"There are a good many things that will have to be settled, you know," he said.

"But an agent can do all this ; money now can be no object with you, for your father, Lord Gilmore, died a very wealthy man.

"Still——"

"Can you go to-morrow?" asked the priest.

"To-morrow?" echoed Gerard, and his face flushed, and his heart beat tumultuously. To leave here to-morrow—to go from all the old scenes—from everyone! Gerard was thinking at this moment of the blue-eyed girl he had walked with in the morning, and on many dewy eves, on the "ribbed sea-shore." He was thinking of May Summers, his sweetheart, and feeling that to part with her thus suddenly would be very painful.

But he naturally said nothing of this to Father Hayward as the two walked on together along the narrow pathway on the cliffs, above the wide, rolling waters of the northern sea. They were strange companions! The priest thoughtful, erudite, mused of many things even while he questioned the young man by his side of his former life, and doubtless hoped to direct and guide his coming days. But Gerard was not by nature inclined to be a docile pupil. He was "a bit of a free-thinker," as he himself expressed it, and though he answered the father civilly and pleasantly, he was by no means as confidential with him as he might have been. He was very glad, therefore, when Father Hayward proposed to return to the village, and mentioned that he would seek a night's lodging at the village inn. Gerard had been afraid that he would be forced to ask him to stay at the farmhouse, and he by no means relished the idea of a whole evening spent in the good Father's company. He therefore turned with alacrity, and escorted Father Hayward to the inn, and parted with him at the door, without, however, committing himself to any absolute promise to start for Wrothsley on the morrow.

"I shall see," he said smilingly, and as the priest entered the inn door it passed through his mind how, though educated and brought up so differently, there was still about this young man some of the characteristics of his parents.

"He is a little self-willed, I fear," he thought, "but by the laws of heredity he was sure to be."

CHAPTER XX.

GERARD'S SWEETHEART.

GERARD went straight, after he had parted with Father Hayward, to a small newly-built house which stood at one end of the village, and which belonged to a man who had contrived to make and save money, though originally he had only been a fisherman.

How John Sumners' luck had turned no one but himself exactly knew. There were various reports about it in the village, some believing that a mysterious "find" out of the deep sea had been the commencement of it, but whatever it had been, John, who was a man of few words, never divulged.

But the facts remained the same; he ceased to be a fisherman, and took to boat-building and boat-selling, and his cobbles and smacks commanded good prices, for they were known to be stout and strong, and fit to weather the stiffest gale. He was hard-working and prudent withal, and as he was a widower with only one child his expenses were not great, and he contrived to give his daughter a fair education, and May Sumners—her name was really Mary—was considered the prettiest girl in Scarley, and might have had many wooers if she had condescended to smile on the young men of the class of life from which her father had originally sprung.

But her education had made her feel superior to them, and when Gerard Brewster took Crag-side Farm, and came occasionally courting to John Sumners' house, May told herself, that, in spite of his bodily deformity she liked him better than the stalwart, brown-skinned young fishermen, who seemed coarse and unmannerly now to her dainty blue eyes. Gerard's handsome face and generous hand also pleased her woman's fancy, and it was understood in the village that these two were lovers, though they were not actually engaged to be married to each other when Father Hayward first met them by the rustic stile.

Gerard, therefore, having arrived at the newly-built house, on one side of which was the building-yard where lay various unfinished boats, while in front a small neatly-

kept garden showed that the place was well cared for; May Sumners being a famous little housekeeper who looked well after her father's comforts. She was flitting about the kitchen now, preparing the old man's tea, when she caught sight of Gerard in the garden, who also seeing her went smilingly up to the window on the outside. May, inside, smiled too, and put her finger to her rosy lips to indicate silence, and pointed to her father sleeping by the fire in his great arm-chair.

A lined, solemn face had John Sumner, as many of those have who toil on the great waters, and live face to face with the dangers and wonders of the deep. He looked rugged, but kindly, with his gray hair hanging round his brown features, and his strong hands resting on his knees. He had blue eyes, like his daughter, and these would ever soften strangely as they rested on her fair young face. He was in truth proud of his girl, and grudged her nothing, and May was fond of her old father, and did her best to cheer his life.

Still smiling, she now came to the door of the house to speak to Gerard, who went eagerly forward and took her hand.

"I want to see you, May," he said in a low tone; "can you come out for a walk?"

"Not now," she answered, speaking softly; "It's just father's tea time, though he's fallen asleep there, poor man, by the fire, for he had a hard day yesterday."

"When can you come, then?" went on Gerard. "Something wonderful has happened, and I want to tell you about it."

"Something wonderful?" repeated May, lifting her blue eyes to her lover's face.

She was really a pretty girl, fair and pink-cheeked, with bright light hair, and small delicate features, and so Gerard thought as he stood there looking at her in the clear light of the spring-time day.

"Yes," he answered, excitedly "as good as a fairy tale, and I am dying to tell you all about it, May."

"I can get out later," said May, whose curiosity was naturally roused; "I can go down to the sands about eight, Gerard, if you will meet me there?"

"All right; be sure you come; I'll be by the big rock where we sat yesterday, exactly at a quarter to eight; so be a dear girl and don't keep me waiting."

They settled it thus, and Gerard, after holding her hand a few moments longer than necessary, left the garden, and returned to the farmhouse, where he found Mrs. Brewster, standing at the front door looking out anxiously for him.

She went forward to meet him half-timidly.

"Oh, Gerard," she said, and then paused as if afraid to say more.

"Well, all this is a wonderful affair, isn't it?" he replied, looking at her and smiling, for he was in truth very fond of this only mother he had ever known, and from whose hands he had always received the greatest kindness.

"It's more than wonderful," she answered, solemnly. "I thought nothing in heaven or earth would have forced the secret from my lady's lips. She made me swear on the crucifix I would never reveal it; never on my death-bed: never to a living soul!"

"But it's all true, I suppose?" asked Gerard, a little anxiously.

"All true. My lady cared more for my lord's love than for her first-born; and she gave you to me, Gerard, and now she is taking you away."

Tears rushed into the poor woman's eyes as she said this, and rolled down her wrinkled cheeks, and Gerard put his hand kindly upon her shoulder.

"She won't do that," he said, "it was a disgraceful thing to do, but she was to blame and not you, and I won't forget that I owe my life, I daresay, to your kindness."

"You were very frail and feeble then, dear," answered Mrs. Brewster humbly, "and many and many a time I thought I should never rear you, and now when you're grown so well and strong——"

"Except this cursed birthright they are always talking about," interrupted Gerard, bitterly, as Mrs. Brewster paused to wipe away her fast falling tears.

"Oh, that is nothing now, dear; my lady will see it is nothing now, and Gerard you are your father's living image. My lord was the handsomest man I ever saw, and when I look at your face I can just believe he is standing again before me."

These words soothed Gerard's vain heart, and he began to tell Mrs. Brewster about Father Hayward's advice,

“He’s a sly old fox that,” he said with a laugh, “and I can see he wants to lead me by the nose, but I won’t be so easily led, perhaps, as he thinks. But still, of course I should have my rights, and I mean to have them too if I can get them ; so you must mind, stand by me and keep to the same story, old woman.”

Again he put his hand on her shoulder, and Mrs. Brewster bent down her head and kissed it.

“Don’t fear for me, my dear,” she said, “I would die for you ; and now I’ve got only to speak the truth, and no one can disprove what I say.”

“And this lady—for, hang it ! I can’t call her mother—used to send you money, I suppose ?”

“Yes, dear ; for four-and-twenty years she sent me regularly three hundred a year to bring you up on, and when we took this place she advanced the money to stock the farm.”

“And you can prove this ?” asked Gerard, sharply.

“Yes, Gerard ; and my lady tells me in the letter that his reverence brought me to-day, that she has kept most of my letters, for I wrote to her twice a year always, and sometimes more, to tell her how you were getting on.”

Gerard took off his soft felt cap and waved it triumphantly in the air on hearing this.

“It’s all right then,” he said ; “and this other fine gentleman brother of mine will have to come down in the world a peg or two when I go up. But now come in, old woman, and give me some tea.”

He grew more excited during this meal, and boasted not a little what he would do when he came into his own wealth ; and Mrs. Brewster sat and listened with a heavy heart, for she knew that he must now leave her, and that her adopted son had virtually passed away from her.

And she feared, too, for Gerard. He had not been reared to occupy the position he would now be called upon to fill, and she felt that he was unfitted for it. He had had a fair education, certainly, but his life at the farm and in the village had naturally not been a very elevated one, and then what about May Sumners, the poor woman thought, looking at Gerard with anxious eyes.

Presently he rose and went out to smoke, and loitered about the place until the time came when he was to meet May. Then Mrs. Brewster saw him pluck a flower in the garden and heard him go up to his own bedroom, and

when he came down again the flower was in his coat, and he stood and looked at himself for a moment or two in the glass in the hall before he went forth.

"He is going to meet that girl," she thought with a moan; "whatever will my lady say?"

Gerard in the meanwhile was proceeding leisurely towards the shore, cutting at the long grass that grew in the hedgerows as he went. The night was serene and beautiful, but he looked not at sky nor sea. He could not help thinking what a great man he was now, or would be, and meeting a young fisherman whom he knew, nodded to him so condescendingly that the fellow turned round and scowled at him after he had passed. But Gerard, happily unconscious of this, went on his way, and soon found himself on the sands, and when he reached the ridge of brown, sea-worn rocks where he expected to meet May, to his surprise he found the girl already seated there.

She rose with a smile, and held out her hand.

"I am here first, you see," she said playfully.

"But I'm not late," answered Gerard, pulling out his watch; "it wants a quarter to eight yet, Miss May!"

The girl laughed.

"I know it does," she said; "but it is such a fine night that I came early—and, besides, I want to hear this wonderful story, you know."

"Well, it is wonderful. Let me sit here beside you, and I'll tell you."

"Is it good or bad news?" asked May, as the young man seated himself by her side.

He did not speak for a moment; then he bent forward and took her hand.

"Would you call it bad if it took me away from you?" he asked.

In a moment her pretty, girlish face flushed, and her breath fluttered.

"Took you away?" she repeated. "I—I do not understand."

"Well, May, that priest you saw me meet this morning, brought strange news. It seems that the good woman up at the farm yonder, whom I always thought was my mother, is not really my mother, but my nurse. My real mother is a great lady, and she has sent for me now to return to her."

A little cry broke from May's parted lips, and her

color faded as suddenly as it flushed, and a look of fear stole into her blue eyes, which were now fixed on Gerard's face.

"My mother," went on Gerard, with a ring of half-suppressed pride in his voice, "is Lady Gilmore, the widow of the late Lord Gilmore, and I am their eldest son."

"What!" cried May, with an absolute start.

"They say every word of it is true; the priest says so, and my mother has written to me to tell me it is so, and the old woman at the farm—but I'm sorry for her—has confessed the whole story."

"But—but what motive had they, Gerard?" now asked May in a startled voice.

Gerard's face fell at this direct question.

"A very queer one it seems," he answered; "my father and mother had another son, a year younger than I am, and this boy when we were babies was stout and strong, and I was weak and puny, and my father very amiably often wished I was dead to make way for the other one. And my mother, absolutely thinking it would please him, took me away with Nurse Brewster, and they schemed together, and pretended to my father that I had died of fever, but really Nurse Brewster reared me up, and called me her son—and here I am!"

Gerard gave rather a forced laugh, as he concluded his story, but it was not echoed by May. She turned away her head, and her bosom heaved strangely, and Gerard bending forward saw that tears had gathered unbidden in her eyes.

"Why should this vex you, May?" he said tenderly, putting his arm round her waist, and drawing her closer to him, "it won't make any difference between us, you know."

"Yes," said the girl, with a little sob.

"No, indeed it won't!" continued Gerard earnestly; "They chose to bring me up out of my station, and I've chosen a girl they may call out of my station, but if you care for me really, dear May, no one shall part us."

"Yes, they will part us," said May, in great distress, and her head fell on his breast, but Gerard only drew her closer, and bent down, and again and again kissed her sweet face.

"It will part us for a week or two perhaps," he said, "until every thing is settled, but if they expect to lead me

they are mistaken. Promise me, May, to keep true to me, and I will promise faithfully to be true to you?"

Then May lifted up her head and promised, and thus these two plighted their troth on the lonely shore; but somehow, as the sea moan fell on her ears, May Sumners shuddered as she listened to its weird and mystic tongue.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STRANGER SON.

THE next morning about half-past nine o'clock just as Gerard for the first time that day went to the farmhouse door, and stood for a moment or two on the threshold, with his hands in his pockets, thinking of the future which now lay before him, he suddenly perceived the tall, even stately form, of Father Hayward approaching him.

He went down the garden walk to meet him and opened the gate with a smile.

"I am an early visitor you see," said the priest holding out his hand; "but I have had a letter from Lady Gilmore this morning; a letter I wish you to see."

Gerard's face naturally flushed a little at this announcement.

"She is most anxious," went on Father Hayward, "that you should start for Wrothsley to-day, for she was not feeling so well yesterday, and dreads that a second attack of paralysis might seize her, and again deprive her of speech. You see how important it is that you should go at once?"

"Yes," said Gerard casting down his eyes.

"Can you arrange to start with me in an hour, then?"

"No, I'm sure I can't," answered Gerard decisively; "I could leave here in the afternoon, perhaps."

"But then we could not reach Wrothsley to-day, which I am most anxious that you should do. Nothing can be of so much consequence as that you should see your mother without delay, so let me urge you to put every other consideration aside."

But Gerard still hesitated; he would see May Sumners before he went, he was determined: but finally Father Hayward persuaded him to promise to start for the south

at mid-day, and Gerard had thus no time to lose. He went into the house with the priest, who wished to see Mrs. Brewster, and he told this poor woman, who was very sad at the prospect of losing her adopted son, that she had to pack his portmanteau for him: and then he hurried to the village to seek May, whom he found at home very busy, with some household work in the kitchen. Her sleeves were tucked up, and she had a large bibbed apron on, and when she heard Gerard's rap at the house door, she went just as she was to open it, as she by no means expected him at this early hour.

With a blush and a start she recognized him. She had spent a very sleepless night, thinking of the great change of fortune which had come to Gerard, and which now, through him, was reflected on her own life. It seemed like a dream to her still, and yet as he stood there before her, it all flashed back to her mind, and also the incongruity of her present dress and occupation to her future state.

"Gerard," she said, trying nervously to pull down her sleeves over her round soft arms, "I—I did not expect you so early."

"May I come in?" he answered. "Is the old man in the house, May?"

"No, he is in the work-yard."

By this time poor May had got down her sleeves, and was proceeding to untie her apron in the passage, when Gerard took her in his arms and kissed her affectionately.

"Oh! don't, Gerard—I feel so ashamed to be so untidy!" she exclaimed.

"Never mind about being untidy; you are always pretty in my eyes you know, and always will be. There darling, let me have another kiss, and now come into the kitchen."

"Had we better not go into the parlor?" she said hesitatingly.

"Nonsense," replied Gerard smiling, for he had generally been in the habit of talking to May in the kitchen, and understood why she wished him to go into the parlor now, "the kitchen will do very well—for I've come on a sad business, May—I have come to say good-bye."

The girl's face quickly grew a little pale.

"Not to-day?" she asked in a low tone.

"Unfortunately to-day; that priest won't let me alone; it seems my mother, Lady Gilmore, is most anxious to see

me at once, as she is afraid of taking another fit, and so Father Hayward got a letter from her this morning to urge him to take me to Wrothsley Castle to-day, and though I tried hard to get another day or so here, the old boy would not hear of it, and we start at twelve o'clock."

"Oh, Gerard!"

"Now, May darling, you've not to look sad about it," continued Gerard, again putting his arm round her slim waist; "you know what I promised you last night, and I mean to keep to my word, and nothing shall turn me from it. But don't you see it's of great consequence that I should see the old lady at once, if there is any chance of her being ill again, for of course that precious younger brother of mine is sure to make a fight for the property and the title, and that kind of thing. So I thought it was best to go to-day, as the priest urged it, and I've just run down to say a word to you, and to tell you how awfully cut up I feel at the idea of parting with you even for a short time."

"And you won't change?" she answered taking his hand and looking wistfully up with her blue eyes into his face.

"I swear I won't."

"But as you are rich and have a grand name, fine ladies will be running after you, Gerard, and then maybe you'll forget your poor little girl by the sea."

"The fine ladies may run, but they won't catch me," laughed Gerard. "Now May, give me a bit of your pretty hair to take away with me," and he caressingly laid his hand on her hair as he spoke, "and then if the fine ladies you mention want to make love to me, I'll show them the little curl I carry about with me, and tell them I cut it from my pretty sweetheart's head."

"And will you give me a bit of yours?" she asked softly.

"Of course," answered Gerard, "but I must cut it with discretion," he added smiling. "As I am going into such grand company I mustn't spoil my beauty, so have you a looking-glass here, May?"

She went to one of the shelves on the kitchen wall, and took down a small square hand-glass and held it up to Gerard, who then carefully selected a little piece of his bright, crisp, curling brown hair.

"I think this won't be missed," he said, as he rather regretfully cut off the love-lock, "and now, darling, let me have a piece of this pretty stuff."

And May was not afraid of injuring her hair, and so let

Gerard take as much as he wished. Her heart indeed felt too sad at the thought of Gerard going away from her to care for anything else, and when he took her in his arms to bid her good-bye it was all she could do to restrain her tears.

"You will write?" she whispered with her head on his breast.

"I will write to-morrow," he answered, "and tell you all about how I get on. I don't mean to be brow-beaten you know by any of these fine people, and that I'll soon let them see. But now, May darling, I must go—you love me truly and really don't you, May?"

"Oh yes, yes, Gerard."

"And you loved me before all this came I know; you loved me, didn't you, when I was only plain Gerard Brewster, or at least imagined myself to be?"

"You know I did," whispered the girl.

They parted in the tenderest fashion, and again and again renewed their promises of faith to each other, and then—slowly, reluctantly—Gerard left her, carrying away the memory of her sweet face in his heart.

He found on his return to the farmhouse that Father Hayward had not been idle in his absence. Mrs. Brewster had, in fact, signed a deposition which he had drawn out, fully confirming Lady Gilmore's confession regarding Gerard's birth and supposed death in every particular. Poor Mrs. Brewster was in great grief, but she had obeyed Gerard's request, and his portmanteau was packed and ready; but she fairly broke down when the moment of parting came, and sobbed aloud when Gerard bent down to kiss her.

"Nonsense," he said, kindly, "don't go on like that; I'll be back here very soon, I can tell you."

But Mrs. Brewster knew the world better than he did.

"No, my dear," she wept, "you're going into a new life, and it's but natural you should forget the old one."

"I'm sure he will not forget his kind nurse who has tended him all these years," said Father Hayward; "and in all probability also, Mrs. Brewster, you will be called to Wrothsley to substantiate Gerard's claims."

"Of course I won't forget you," said Gerard, once more shaking her hand; "good-bye, take care of yourself, like a good old woman, until I come back."

And so he parted from the woman who had nursed and

reared him for twenty-five years. He had a smile on his face as he went out of the door, but Mrs. Brewster covered hers with her hands and wailed aloud.

"I thought to have him by me to close my eyes in death," she moaned; "but now it is all over; he's gone away and will never come back."

In the meanwhile, Gerard and the priest were walking on towards the village inn, from whence they drove in a carriage to the nearest railway station. They travelled by a fast train, and reached London about seven in the evening, and then proceeded direct to Wrothsley, arriving about ten o'clock. At the station at Wrothsley a carriage awaited them, as Father Hayward had telegraphed during the day to Lady Gilmore, that they were on their way. Gerard by this time was somewhat pale and agitated, in spite of all his big words to poor May Sumners.

"You are nearing your home now," said Father Hayward, kindly and reassuringly, as they drove on in the luxurious carriage through the dark lanes. Then they reached the West Lodge at Wrothsley and entered the park, and Gerard leaned his head out of the carriage window to hide his nervousness.

"The park is very extensive," went on the calm voice of the priest, "and well stocked with deer, and the lake absolutely abounds in water-fowl; by-the-bye, I forgot to ask you, are you a sportsman?"

"I have shot a hare or two," answered Gerard, huskily.

"Ah, that will all soon come right, you will have plenty of shooting here, and most young men like it."

Another quarter of an hour brought them to the front entrance of the Castle, and a few moments later Gerard was standing in the great hall, and as the butler, Graham, advanced to receive the travellers, this ordinarily calm man absolutely started as his eyes fell on Gerard's face.

"My lady gave orders that she would receive you and—this gentleman at once, on your arrival," he said, not in his usual even tones. Gerard's likeness to his late lord had startled the butler, and there had been strange rumors about the Castle and the neighborhood for some days.

"Come, then," said the priest, putting his arm through Gerard's, and leading him gravely up the magnificent staircase, for Gerard was too much agitated by this time almost to know where he was going. He had never been in such a house before, and had had no idea of such wealth

and luxury as surrounded him on every side. His heart was beating fast, and his face was flushed, and his hands trembled, as they traversed the thickly-carpeted broad corridors, and reached at last the room where Lady Gilmore awaited them in greater agitation even than her stranger son.

Father Hayward rapped softly at the door, and then led Gerard in; led him up to the rich satin couch on which was seated a pale woman with dark, restless eyes, who rose with a half-cry on her pallid lips as they approached her.

"I have brought your son back to you," said the priest, gently. "Gerard, this is your mother, Lady Gilmore."

Then Lady Gilmore put out her quivering hand.

"It is his father's face—his father's face," she murmured, as Gerard nervously took her hand in his own trembling one.

"It is a remarkable likeness, certainly," said Father Hayward, as Lady Gilmore's eyes still dwelt on the familiar, yet unfamiliar, features. It was like looking on the dead again she was thinking, for Gerard had inherited the late Lord Gilmore's every lineament.

"Will you forgive me?" she asked after a moment or two of painful silence.

"Oh, yes, its no use talking of it now," answered Gerard; and as Lady Gilmore heard his voice, she started back a little and dropped his hand from her cold stiff fingers.

This was not the voice nor accent of her husband, nor yet of that beloved son who had stabbed his mother's heart. Lady Gilmore had forgotten that a youth reared in a remote village on the Northern coast had had no chance of speaking like a well-bred man, when his only companions had been the fishermen, or at best a young farmer or two, or the son of the keeper of the village inn. Gerard, in fact, spoke with a strong North-country accent, though his voice was not an unpleasant one, but now it grated harshly on his mother's ears. And as she dropped his hand he turned away from her, and as he did this her eyes fell on the defect in his figure, on the bitter birth-right which had made him an alien and a stranger to his father's house.

A sort of a moan escaped Lady Gilmore's lips, and she covered her face with her hand. Was she thinking

of the tall, slender, graceful form of that other son, and of her own sin to both? Some strong emotion was surging in her breast, for her lips quivered convulsively, and Gerard saw her hands twitch, and he began to feel sorry for her.

"Don't vex yourself any more about it now," he said, still in that deep, rough tone; "what's done cannot be undone, you know, and we must just try to make the best of it," and Gerard smiled.

It was her husband's very smile. It lit Gerard's face, and carried the thoughts of the pale woman, who was watching him, back to her early wedded days; to the passionate and devoted love she had given to her handsome lord; to a thousand tender memories and joys.

"The wrong to you must be undone," she said in a low tone; "did you bring Nurse Brewster with you?"

"No," said Father Hayward, "but I brought with me her deposition, confirming in every particular your statement."

"But that is not enough!" exclaimed Lady Gilmore excitedly. "Nurse Brewster must come here and declare before the whole household, before my other son, before their great-aunt, the wrong we did. This is Lord Gilmore and everyone must know it!"

"I can telegraph for Mrs. Brewster to-morrow," answered Father Hayward soothingly; "but would it not be wise now to end this interview? 'Tis not good for you, so much excitement, and my young friend here, I am sure, is greatly in need of some refreshment:" and the good father kindly laid his hand on Gerard's shoulder.

"Come to me, then, Gerard," said Lady Gilmore, again stretching out her hand, which he took, "my son, whom I have wronged so deeply, stoop down that I may kiss your face."

And Gerard bent down, and she kissed him with her quivering lips.

"God has spared me to atone to you," she said solemnly, "say again you forgive me?"

"Yes, indeed I do," answered Gerard heartily, for he was touched by his mother's words; and again Lady Gilmore kissed him; kissed the face she had last touched when he was a little babe,

CHAPTER XXII.

THE NEW LORD.

GERARD awoke next morning with a confused sense of not knowing where he was ; awoke and looked around him, and saw, instead of the neat, homely furniture at Cragside Farmhouse, a room, the fittings of which were extremely luxurious. Lady Gilmore had given orders that her son was to occupy one of the state bedrooms of the Castle, and thither the night before, Graham the butler had escorted him. Graham knew by this time who Gerard really was, and had lost no time in courting the rising sun.

Scarcely indeed had Gerard and Father Hayward retired from her presence, when Lady Gilmore summoned this old family servant to her side. Graham had been in the Castle at the time when the small empty coffin supposed to contain the little dead heir, had been interred in the family vault, and he had heard rumors also that this had lately been opened in the presence of a magistrate, Father Hayward, and a London lawyer. There had been naturally much gossip among the servants on the subject, but until Gerard arrived, Lady Gilmore had not spoken of it to any of them.

Now, however, she broke the silence.

“Graham,” she said, addressing him, “you saw the gentleman who arrived with Father Hayward to-night; of whom does his face remind you?”

Graham hesitated for a moment.

“I scarcely like to say, my lady,” he said; “but if I may take the liberty of doing so, he had a look, I thought, of his late lordship.”

“He may well have, for he is his son—his eldest son,” answered Lady Gilmore with emotion; “when he was a babe—a weak and puny babe—it was given out that he had died of fever, and a little coffin was brought here, and placed by his grandfather’s side in the family vault in the chapel; you remember this?”

“I remember the melancholy occasion perfectly, my lady.”

“That coffin was an empty one ; I deceived his father and pretended he had died, because my lord ardently wished his other son to be the heir, as this poor child was a hunchback. But he did not die, and has been reared by Nurse Brewster, and now he has come home—I have acknowledged him—he is in truth Lord Gilmore, and not——”

Her voice broke and faltered as she alluded again to “the other son,” and Graham bowed respectfully as he listened.

“It is very strange, my lady,” he said, “but you could have knocked me over with a feather the moment my eyes fell on his face to-night, the likeness to his late lordship is so strong. Am I to understand, my lady, that we have now to address him as Lord Gilmore?”

“Certainly, as Lord Gilmore ; I have called you here to tell you this, and I request you to make it known in the household. Steps will be taken immediately to have his title acknowledged, for none can dispute it. Nurse Brewster will be here to morrow, and then, everyone shall know.”

Again Graham bowed.

“I trust you will forgive an old family servant expressing a hope, my lady,” he said, “that the young Lord will be a great comfort and happiness to you, and be as like his late lordship in everything as he is in face.”

Thus Graham knew when he waited on Gerard at the first meal he partook of at Wrothsley, that he was waiting on his future lord, and when he escorted Gerard to his bed room, he addressed him by his title.

“My lady informed me after your arrival, my lord,” he said, “that you are the rightful heir ; and as I have been in the family for twenty-seven years, I hope you’ll excuse me mentioning that I never saw such likeness in my life as you are to his late lordship, your father,”

“Everyone tells me that,” said Gerard, well pleased.

“He was an uncommon handsome man,” went on the butler, “and your lordship is his very image, far more like than the other gentleman—Mr. Hugh that now is.”

“What sort of fellow is my brother?” asked Gerard, delighted with the butler’s remarks.

“He’s a very pleasant free-handed young gentleman, and good looking also, but does not take after his father as much as you do, my lord ; in fact it’s just wonderful.”

So Gerard went to bed excited and gratified, and for a long time could not sleep amid his unfamiliar surroundings. And when he awoke in the morning, he could not at first tell where he was. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then it all came back to him. He was Lord Gilmore; all this splendor was his, and the butler had said he was like his handsome father, and Gerard's vain heart loved to think this.

He got up and looked out of the window; looked on the wide-spreading park with its green slopes and groups of stately trees, below which the deer browsed in the sheltered glades. He could see too what a great house it was with its marble terraces and fountains, and in the far vista a gleam of the shining waters of the lake. Wrothsley was looking beautiful in the sweet spring-time with its fresh-opened leaves and blossoms, beneath a blue white-flecked sky, and a bright shining morning sun. But its splendors half frightened Gerard. He had never been in such a place before, and it filled him with a vague sense of his own inferiority somehow. He turned away from the window with a half sigh, and then began to dress himself in his very best.

Poor Gerard! The brown, country-made velveteen coat, the white waistcoat, and bright red necktie, might seem very attractive in the eyes of rustic maidens like May Sumners, but they looked sadly out of place beneath these decorated ceilings. And so Graham the butler thought, when he beheld his young lordship in this gay attire.

"He ain't fit for it," reflected this sagacious man, "but my lady has no one but herself to thank for his countrified appearance, and a good valet will soon polish him up a bit."

But we may be sure he gave no hint of his private thoughts to Gerard. Father Hayward started for town immediately after breakfast, for the purpose of seeing the family lawyer (who had been present when the little empty coffin was opened in the vault), to take his advice regarding Gerard assuming the title, and to consult counsel on this point, and also on the best mode of communicating his mother's confession and deposition to Hugh Gifford, now called Lord Gilmore.

Father Hayward carried with him also the whole correspondence which had taken place during the twenty-

four years of Gerard's life, between Lady Gilmore and Mrs. Brewster, regarding his health and rearing, and the money which had been expended on his behalf. Both Lady Gilmore and Mrs. Brewster had, strange to say, preserved all these letters, and Lady Gilmore held the receipt for the large sum of money she had advanced for Gerard to stock and take his farm, and which had also passed through Mrs. Brewster's hands. The lawyers naturally deemed these papers to be of the greatest importance in the case, supposing it went to trial, as they considered, that without doubt they fully established Gerard's claim to be the late Lord Gilmore's eldest son, and confirmed the depositions by Lady Gilmore and Mrs. Brewster regarding the deception they had practiced on the late lord.

Thus, after Father Hayward left Wrothsley, Gerard found it so lonely, he was glad to have the butler to talk to, and Graham showed him over the great house, opening with no small pride the doors of the state apartments, pointing out in the large drawing-room the walls hung with light blue satin damask, worked with silver-gray figures, the frieze above being white and gold. There was everything here that wealth could purchase, the floors of all the principal rooms being of oak, with wide parquetry borders, and one room was panelled with richly carved frames filled with splendid specimens of Aubuseen tapestry.

But the great boast and pride of the house, were the pictures, and Graham acted as showman of these too.

"That ead' of an old woman is a Rembrandt, my lord," he went on pointing out picture after picture to Gerard's astonished gaze, "and yon landscape with 'orses is a Gerard Dow. We have a Rubens too—very fine, that his late lordship, your lordship's father, set great store on. And we have Holbeins, and Teniers, and in fact all the best of 'em. When the family is away crowds of people come here to see the pictures, and I believe there is no better collection in England. May I ask if your lordship is fond of h'art?"

"Don't know much about it," answered Gerard with a blush, at the idea of his own ignorance.

"It's a taste that grows," continued the butler reflectively, "and as his late lordship was a great h'art connoisseur, I have no doubt your lordship will inherit it, the same as you have done the features of his face. This is a por-

trait of his late lordship, and you'll excuse me saying so, but it might pass as your lordship's picture, except being older."

So Gerard stood and looked at his father's pictured face and told himself that he was indeed his son. They had the same features, the same bright, smiling, reckless eyes, and crisp brown curling hair. Only that hapless birthright which had marred Gerard's life made the difference, and a frown passed over his face as this thought crossed his mind.

"I think I am tired of looking at the pictures," he said turning away a little impatiently, and the polite butler instantly took the hint.

"Perhaps your lordship would like a little refreshment?" he said. "'Tis very fatiguing standing about."

"I think I'd like a drink," replied Gerard, and having expressed his preference for champagne, so as to impress the butler with the idea that it was a beverage he partook of every day, Graham made haste to put before him some of the very finest wine the cellars contained.

"That's not bad," said Gerard, who was quite incapable of appreciating its excellence; and as the butler removed the empty bottle he could not suppress a sigh.

"Poor fellow," he reflected, "his ignorance is just h'awful."

The rare vintage however had raised Gerard's spirits, and he felt much less afraid to encounter "the old lady," he confided to Graham under its influence, when, about mid-day, Lady Gilmore summoned him to her presence. He entered her room with a smile, and put out his hand, which his mother held in her poor cramped one for a few moments in silence.

"And how have you spent the morning?" she asked presently, still with her dark eyes fixed on his face.

"Oh, very well," answered Gerard; "that butler fellow has been showing me over the place and the pictures."

"They are very fine," said Lady Gilmore slowly, and as her glance wandered over his dress and general appearance she sighed deeply. She was thinking how like he was, and yet how unlike to her husband, and the son she had loved too dearly. And she saw also, only too clearly, that Gerard's rearing had unfitted him for the station he was now called upon to hold, and her wrong to him could never be quite undone.

"Graham is an old family servant, and you can safely ask him any questions—about—how things go on here, you know," she said with some hesitation; and after he left her, she sent for Graham.

"Graham," and a flush rose to her sallow face as she spoke, and her eyes fell before the grave butler's; "could you advise my son regarding his dress—about having a new tailor, I mean—you see he has been educated in the country, and of course—" and she paused.

Graham bowed respectfully.

"I could mention to his lordship the firm in town who supplies—Mr. Hugh, my lady," he said, and Lady Gilmore gave a little start, and bit her lips as she heard the unfamiliar name.

"If you can do so without offence, I shall be glad," she answered a moment later, and after she had dismissed Graham, that discreet man retired to his own apartment to consider how he could best undertake this delicate office.

Gerard in the meantime was engaged in writing his promised letter to May Sumners, and as he did so the same feeling stole over him that he had felt when he had first looked out in the morning on the park. The splendid fittings of the room he was writing in seemed, somehow, to overwhelm his ideas, and after an attempt or two he flung down his pen and tore up his unfinished letter.

"I will write to-morrow," he told himself, and then rang the bell for Graham.

"I want to go out," he said; "will you come with me to show me the way about."

"Your lordship would like to see the lake perhaps," answered Graham, who had now decided on his course of action; "and the other scenery in the park, which is also considered very fine; and I was going to ask your lordship if I might be allowed to act as your valet until you engage one; and as it may be late before we return to the Castle, if you will permit me I will lay out your evening-dress, for dinner, before we go?"

Graham had rightly guessed that Gerard was almost sure to have no evening-dress, and the scarlet flush which rose to his face at these words immediately told the butler that his surmise was true.

"Evening-dress," repeated Gerard in confusion, "I have none with me, I think; I came away in such a hurry, d'ye see."

"They are easily supplied, my lord," smiled Graham; "your brother, Mr. Hugh, deals with a first-rate West End firm in town, and if you will allow me I can telegraph to them to send down one of their people to take your lordship's measurement, for a dress suit, and anything else you may require?"

"Perhaps that would be the best plan," answered Gerard, "I suppose—they always dress here for dinner?"

"Always, my lord," replied the butler, even with solemnity, and Gerard gave an uneasy laugh as he listened.

"Well, I'll either dine as I am to-day or go without dinner," he said; "however, write to the fellow you mentioned, and then I should like to look about the place a bit."

Graham having obtained this authority wrote to the London firm, and requested them to send down at once everything that was required for a "young gentleman's outfit," and thus Gerard's dress at all events would no longer offend fastidious eyes.

And while these arrangements for his benefit were going on at Wrothsley, Father Hayward had journeyed to town, and gone straight when he arrived there, to the offices of the family lawyer, who was already acquainted with the strange events which had taken place in the House of Gilmore.

He was a shrewd, worldly man this, and considered that Lady Gilmore would have acted much more wisely to have let this folly and sin of her youth rest in silence. But, as she had chosen not to do this, the consequences were unavoidable. He received Father Hayward with courtesy, and listened to his account of Gerard's arrival at Wrothsley with a smile.

"I must say I feel not a little sorry for Lord Gilmore," he said; "as I see no reason to doubt Lady Gilmore's most remarkable story, and this correspondence you have brought apparently completely confirms it. But of course it will have to be thoroughly investigated, and ultimately go before a Committee of the House of Lords. And, strange to say, Lord Gilmore, without any knowledge of the facts whatever, has just returned to town. This is a letter I received from him this morning.

Father Hayward took the letter in his hand which Mr. Stafford the lawyer held toward him, and, having asked permission, read the following words:—

“DEAR SIR,—When in Florence a few days ago, I saw in an English newspaper that my mother was slowly recovering from a severe illness, and I therefore started at once for England. Will you kindly call upon me at my hotel here, and tell me all the particulars, which of course will be known to you. I suppose it is no secret that my mother was highly offended by my marriage, and as she did not answer the letter I wrote to her to announce it, I scarcely care to address her directly. Still I am anxious to hear how she is, and shall be pleased if you will call and see me. And I remain, dear Sir, yours faithfully,
“GILMORE.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BRIDEGROOM AND THE BRIDE.

WHILE Father Hayward and Mr. Stafford were talking of him, the young man whom we have hitherto called Lord Gilmore, was sitting in his hotel, looking smilingly up in the face of his young wife, who was standing before him trying to persuade him to go with her to pay her first visit after her return to her mother's house.

Nancy was looking very pretty, and was dressed in a gray Parisian costume, and her whole appearance was charming. Yet this fair bride of a few months was urging her request in vain.

“Oh, do go, please Gilmore,” she said, bending down and taking his hand; “mother will think it unkind if you do not.”

“My dear child,” answered her husband, still smiling, “I have every respect for, and wish to please your mother, but Aunt Fannie is more than I can stand.”

“Still, to please me?” pleaded Nancy.

“Even for the sake of that luxury I have not strength of mind to be gushed over, perhaps even kissed by, Mrs. Barclay. Don't ask me to go, Nancy, like a good little girl, for I really cannot.”

“Very well,” she replied, and she dropped his hand, and turned away, feeling not a little wounded and hurt.”

At this moment, however, a servant entered the room, announced that the carriage was waiting for Lady Gilmore, and he also brought in a telegram for her lord.

Gilmore—for we must yet call him so, as he still bore that name—opened this carelessly, and then went up to Nancy, and put his hand on her shoulder and held the open telegram towards her.

“There, my dear,” he said, “this is my excuse, if it wants one, for not accompanying you to the maternal mansion. This is from Mr. Stafford, the lawyer, and you see he says he will call here at four o’clock, and as I wish to see him it is impossible that I can go with you. Come, are you ready, and I’ll take you down to the carriage?”

“I have some things to take with me,” answered Nancy, just a little coldly. “I will ring and tell Philips to take them down to the carriage.”

“All right. I forgot the family presents,” answered Gilmore good-naturedly, and then he stooped down and kissed Nancy’s sweet face. “Don’t look cross, little woman,” he went on, “but that aunt of yours is really too much for me?”

“Very well,” smiled Nancy, and having given her orders to her maid to carry various parcels to the carriage, she put her hand through her husband’s arm, and Gilmore escorted her to the carriage.

He handed her in, and having given the address to the coachman, stood talking to her for a moment or two.

“Give my love to Mrs. Loftus,” he said, “and don’t forget to be back in time for dinner. Good-bye for the present;” and then he shook hands with her, and as Nancy was driven away she sank back on the cushions of the brougham with a little sigh.

And there was a vague feeling of disappointment in her heart. During the months she had passed with Gilmore; months spent amid new scenes and new excitements, she had learnt to know his character better, and to judge it more clearly than she had done in the dim corridor at Wrothsley, or when ardent and impassioned he had wooed her at her mother’s house.

Yet she had nothing to complain of, she told herself frankly. Gilmore had been always kind and good-natured to her, if not always considerate. But she had learned to know now that a certain easy selfishness pervaded his whole nature, and that to sacrifice an hour’s pleasure or convenience to anyone else’s was a thing impossible to him. It had been a shock and a disappointment to Nancy to discover this, for her girlish fancy had endowed

Gilmore with every noble quality, and when she had married him she had seen no fault in him. She had thought "how good and generous of him to marry a poor girl like me," and naturally did not realize the very nature of his love.

It is a bitter thing to wake up from a sweet dream and to learn we have been living in one. The rosy lights die away, and cold reality creeps chilling over our hearts. Nancy was a clever girl, and quick to perceive, and in a short while she began to understand Gilmore. He had wearied a little, too, of his new toy, as he had wearied of the rest, and Nancy saw this, and so a shadow fell upon her young life.

Gilmore was annoyed, too, by his mother's silence. He had thought that she would at once have forgiven him for his marriage when she knew she could not prevent it, and when no answer came to his letter he was utterly astonished. It was at Florence that he first heard of her dangerous illness, and he at once returned to England. He wished, in fact, Lady Gilmore to receive and present his wife, for he had no idea of allowing Nancy to be much with her own people.

Thus he refused to accompany her on her first visit to her mother, and Nancy felt hurt by this, and went back to the little house at West Hampstead with a heavier heart than she had left it. But when she reached the familiar dwelling—and how small it looked—she was smiling brightly, for an eager group of faces were watching at the windows to see her come.

"Here she is!" cried Aunt Fannie with elation, rushing into the passage to receive Nancy, and there actually, something almost like a struggle took place who should first clasp her in their arms.

But Nancy flung hers round her mother's neck and laid her soft rosy cheek against Mrs. Loftus' pale one.

"Dear, dear mother!" she whispered, as Mrs. Loftus kissed her again and again. But Aunt Fannie was determined to have her turn, and began violently kissing Nancy's hair and ears, which were all that were at this moment available.

"How well you look! What a lovely gown! French, I can see," she cried with enthusiasm.

"But where is Lord Gilmore, my dear?"

"His lawyer telegraphed to him that he was going

to call this afternoon," replied Nancy somewhat mendaciously, "so he was not able to come with me. He sent his love to you, mother."

At this moment Nancy's only brother—the schoolboy of twelve—ran into the house by the open street door, as he had been outside looking for Nancy, and immediately began embracing her also.

"My! what a swell you are, Nan!" he exclaimed admiringly, after he had released her. He was a good-looking boy, with an open honest countenance, like his poor father, and had been summoned home for a couple of days especially to receive Nancy. Then Milly, the shy one of the family, and the baby had to be kissed in turns; and finally all Nancy's numerous parcels were brought out of the carriage and carried into the dining-room, and the pleasant task of distributing the family presents began.

She had forgotten none of them; Aunt Fannie was made happy by a costly set of gold ornaments from Rome; Milly by a beautiful cut coral necklace and bracelets; and baby also by a coral necklace, besides various strange foreign toys. For Master Bob Nancy had brought a gold watch, and she also slipped two sovereigns into his eager palm. Even the dark-skinned ayah had been remembered; and for her mother Nancy had brought a jet locket richly set in diamonds containing her dear father's portrait, which she had had painted in miniature from a photograph she possessed.

When these gifts had all been disposed of, the whole family partook of tea with the young bride, and Bob distinguished himself by the prodigious quantity of cakes and muffins he devoured. Aunt Fannie became quite sentimental during the handing of the tea-cups, and spoke of visiting Nancy at her new home.

"But how is it, dear," she said, "that his lordship and yourself did not go direct to the family mansion in Eaton Square instead of to an hotel?"

"Nancy blushed a little at this question.

"We came home hurriedly, you know," she said, "when we heard Lady Gilmore had been so ill; and besides, as Lady Gilmore has taken no notice of us yet, Gilmore thought that we had better go to an hotel."

"That will come all right no doubt," answered Aunt Fannie, nodding her head sagaciously; "and I hope soon to see you, my dear Nancy, settled in your country

seat at Wrothsley, which I am told is a magnificent place."

"It's a very big one, at any rate," smiled Nancy, and then she rose and put her hand on her mother's arm.

"Come and let us have a little chat upstairs, mother," she said, and when she and Mrs. Loftus were alone she had a few words to say which brought tears to her mother's eyes.

"This is for you, mother dear," she said, putting an envelope into her mother's hand which contained bank notes for a hundred pounds; "and I will send a hundred every quarter, and you must not say no."

"My darling, I cannot take it," answered Mrs. Loftus, much affected.

"But you must, mother dear; Gilmore gives me a large allowance for dress and my private expenses, and I can spare a hundred a quarter quite well, and it will make me so happy to think that you will have a little more money to spend."

"But Nancy, darling, you will require a large sum to spend, in your present position, and I could not bear to pinch you. No, dear, I really cannot take it."

"I won't ask you," said Nancy, kissing her mother's cheek, "but I'll leave this to-day, and every quarter you'll get a check for a hundred, and I shall be very cross indeed if you say anything more about it."

Mrs. Loftus hesitated.

"It's too much, my love," she said, "I will take one hundred a year from you if you will, but I cannot take more."

But Nancy would not listen.

"No," she said prettily. "I shall have my own way;" and she finally got it, and after she was gone, when Mrs. Loftus told Aunt Fannie of Nancy's generosity, that lady was extremely delighted.

"I think, Lucy," she answered, "the best thing that we can do now under the circumstances, is to begin to keep house together. You see, with our united incomes, we would fully have a thousand a year and that would enable us to live most comfortably, and in a better style, which is very essential, as Nancy has married into the nobility. What do you say to this idea, for if we decide on it we should begin to look out for a better house?"

But Mrs. Loftus only made some evasive reply to this proposal; she was thinking sadly enough of the time when,

had her sister-in-law offered to join her in housekeeping, that it would have been almost everything to her fatherless children ; but the offer was not then made.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SUSPENDED SWORD.

WHILE Nancy was drinking tea at her mother's, and smiling and chatting to her young brother, and sister's, the suspended sword had fallen, which in truth had hung over Gilmore's head almost from his birth, bringing intense rage, fury, and utter astonishment to his soul.

Scarcely had Nancy left him, when Mr. Stafford, the lawyer, was announced, and Gilmore received him in his usual pleasant, easy fashion.

"Ah, Mr. Stafford," he said, "how are you? I wrote to you to ask about my mother's health; I was terribly shocked to hear she had had such an attack."

"It was a very serious seizure," answered the lawyer gravely: "but she is so far recovered now that she has regained her speech and partially the use of her limbs."

"I am most awfully sorry; you know she and I had a little disagreement at the time of my marriage, but I never expected nor intended that it should be serious. I shall go down to Wrothsley to see her at once I think."

The lawyer cast down his eyes, considering how best to break his news, but for a moment or two spoke no word.

"Have you seen her?" asked Gilmore.

"Yes," answered Mr. Stafford, now looking up. "I was lately sent for to go to Wrothsley, on a most extraordinary business; in fact, so extraordinary, that I could scarcely believe the evidence of my own senses."

"And what was that?" asked Gilmore sharply, who was struck by the lawyer's manner.

"I shall begin by asking you," said Mr. Stafford, "if you remember or ever heard of an elder brother of yours, who was supposed to die in infancy?"

"I could not very well remember him as he died when I was a baby; but I have heard my father speak of him and say he was a hunchback. But why do you say sup-

posed to die? He did die, for when my poor father was buried I saw his little coffin in the vault at Wrothsley."

"Yet now your mother, Lady Gilmore, declares that he did not die——"

"*What?*" interrupted Gilmore, and his face grew pale.

"Lady Gilmore declares most solemnly, and made a deposition in my presence, and that of a magistrate, and a Catholic priest, to the effect that this child is still alive. He is now, of course, grown to manhood, and was brought up, Lady Gilmore affirms, by his nurse, a Mrs. Brewster, with her full knowledge and connivance, and she now wishes, and indeed has acknowledged him as her son, and he is at present at Wrothsley."

An oath broke from Gilmore's quivering lips.

"It is a confounded lie!" he said loudly and passionately. "A plot no doubt hatched by some of those Catholic priests, who have got round my mother and persuaded her to say anything in her weak state. You don't surely for an instant believe such a rubbishy story?"

"I would fain not believe it, Lord Gilmore, but it is a most remarkable affair, and Lady Gilmore, who is in her perfect senses, seemed very much in earnest."

"Why it carries absurdity on its face! What possible motive could she have for saying the child was dead if he were not?"

"A very strange one, if her account be true. It seems your brother was born a hunchback, much to the disgust and anger of your father, who continually said harsh and bitter things to Lady Gilmore on the subject; and when you were born openly declared that he wished this child would die, so that you might become the heir. And the temptation entered Lady Gilmore's mind—so she states—to take the child away, and give out that it had died. She carried this out, she says, and took the baby and his nurse to an obscure village on the northern coast, and from thence wrote to your father that the little heir had died of fever.

"But how could such a thing be carried out? There are such things as certificates of births and deaths, are there not?"

"Certainly; and your mother forwarded a forged certificate to your father, and also had carried with her to this village a little coffin. She states she left the child and its nurse there, and carried the coffin, hidden somehow, with

her back to town, and then drove with it to the house in Eaton Square, and uncovered the coffin as she drove there, and it was carried into the house by the servants, who had been informed that the little heir was dead. The empty coffin had been securely screwed down by the nurse before Lady Gilmore left the village, and by Lord Gilmore's orders it was enclosed in a second coffin in town, on which the age and date of the boy's supposed death was recorded, and it was then taken down to Wrothsley and deposited in the family vault."

"Then why," cried Gilmore excitedly, whose face had grown paler and paler during this narrative, "was this coffin not opened, and this absurd story of a sick woman's fancies cast to the winds?"

"Lord Gilmore, you should never have heard such a story from me if this little coffin had not been opened. In my presence and that of one of my clerks whom I took down with me, as naturally we wished no gossip in the place that we could help: in my presence then, and that of Mr. Brandon, of Brandon, who you know is a magistrate in your county, this coffin was opened, and we found it *empty*; and the one coffin enclosed in the other just as your mother described. The inner-coffin had no inscription, but the outer one had. And I forgot to say the Catholic priest, Father Hayward, was also present."

"Yes, Father Hayward indeed! No doubt he was present to carry out his own plot! I believe this is a conspiracy to defraud me, and no doubt this pretender that they have taken to Wrothsley has been brought up a Roman Catholic?"

"I believe that is so."

"I thought as much. Well, Mr. Stafford, I mean to fight this out to the very end. What! did the fools suppose I was going to be imposed upon by such a stupid fraud as this? I offended my mother by my marriage, and she is a passionate and even violent woman, and in her anger she has allowed the priests to get hold of her, and this empty coffin and invented story are the consequences."

"It may be so—but——"

"It is so!" said Gilmore with strong emphasis. "It is a plot, and nothing but a plot, to rob me of my inheritance."

"Any man would feel as you do under the circum-

stances, and I must say nothing could justify Lady Gilmore in acting as she has done. If her story be indeed true the wrong she did her eldest son is not so great as the wrong she now would do you. But I will show you her deposition——”

“The deposition of a mad woman!” interrupted Gilmore angrily.

“And one strange part of the case is, that both your mother and this Mrs. Brewster have preserved the whole of the correspondence which has been carried on between them during the last twenty-four-years, concerning this boy’s rearing and education; and these letters bear the postmarks of their different dates, which it would be impossible now to procure. Lady Gilmore also, when this young man was twenty-one, advanced a considerable sum of money to stock and take a farm for him, and Lady Gilmore now holds the receipt for this money.”

“Do you believe all this, Mr. Stafford?”

“I have seen all these documents, unfortunately.”

“Then you mean to go over to them?” said Gilmore passionately, the veins in his forehead starting with suppressed rage. “In that case I shall need another lawyer.”

“I most earnestly ask you to consult not one but a dozen, Lord Gilmore. Let us have the best advice in town; consult with first-rate counsel on all the points that I have had the unhappiness to lay before you. And there is one thing I have thought of—Lady Gilmore states that some four and twenty years ago on a certain date, she and the nurse, Mrs. Brewster, took a little hunchbacked child to this northern village, and that she left the nurse and the child there. She also states they have lived in the same village ever since. Now I propose, in your interests, to send down to this village a confidential agent to make inquiries concerning this child. It could not have died without it being known there, for its very birthmark makes this impossible. But if Mrs. Brewster has lived there twenty-four years, and if this infant has been seen to grow from babyhood to boyhood, and then on to manhood, bearing this peculiar birthmark, then I fear the case looks very strong for them, and very black for us.”

Gilmore was silent for a moment or two, and seemed impressed with the lawyer’s argument.

“And this fellow,” he said at length, “whom they have brought to Wrothsley, is he a hunchback too?”

"I have not seen him, but I am told that he is, and also that his likeness to the late Lord Gilmore is very strong."

Gilmore shrugged his shoulders.

"That might be," he said contemptuously.

"Still the coincidences are very strange."

"This fellow may have been my father's son, and my mother may have known of this, and thus kept him from starvation."

"But would she wish to disinherit her own son for the son of another woman?"

"Not if she were in her right senses, but I don't believe she is."

"Well, my advice to you would be—but remember, I entreat you, to take other advice before you act on it—but mine would be for you to go down to Wrothsley, and see your mother, and hear from Lady Gilmore's own lips a story so strange and unaccountable that it seems absolutely impossible fully to believe it. In the meanwhile will you come down to my offices any time it suits you to-morrow, and personally inspect these extraordinary documents, so that you may be satisfied with the truth of what I have told you."

They parted with this arrangement: Gilmore was to go down on the following morning to Mr. Stafford's offices, and an eminent counsel whom Mr. Stafford named had to be summoned to meet him there, and the whole of the papers that Father Hayward had brought up had to be gone over.

"I most earnestly hope we may find some flaw in the chain of the evidence," said the lawyer as he shook Gilmore's hand, and Gilmore tried to smile in reply to this wish, but the attempt was a very feeble one.

But after Mr. Stafford was gone a perfect storm of passion and rage took possession of him. He walked up and down the room, he bit his lips, his brow was damp with moisture, and the expression of his hazel eyes was something terrible.

If this story were true? The very thought was horrible to him, for in all his pampered life Gilmore had fully appreciated the good gifts which Fortune had seemingly showered on him. Young, rich, and handsome, and holding a high position in the world, he had sometimes affected to despise these things, but he had never in truth

done so, and the very idea of losing them, the very thought that his rights should be attacked, filled his soul with unutterable rage.

He was still in this dark and angry mood when Nancy returned. She entered the room looking flushed and happy, for the meeting with her family and the giving of presents had been a great pleasure to her ; but the moment that her eyes fell on Gilmore's face she saw something had greatly annoyed him.

"I hope I am not late," she said. "But the children had so much to say."

"Confound the children !" muttered Gilmore in his rage.

Nancy looked at him in utter astonishment.

"What is the matter?" she asked, approaching him.

"Are you angry about anything, Gilmore?"

"Angry !" he almost shouted. "Do you know what has happened while you have been away? That marriage of ours has enraged my mother so that she absolutely pretends that an elder brother of mine, who died in infancy, did not die, and that I have no right to the title !"

"I do not understand," faltered Nancy, with her frightened eyes fixed on his face.

Then, with outbursts of rage and anger, and passionate exclamations intermingled, Gilmore told the story, and ended it with words that fell on his young listener's heart cold and chill as ice.

"I don't believe a word of it all the same," he said ; "but there it is—and that confounded marriage of ours has caused it all !"

Nancy grew pale, and bit her lips, and her dark eyes fell.

"I have to see the lawyers about it to-morrow," continued Gilmore, who was too much taken up with his own wrongs to notice Nancy's emotion, "and of course I mean to fight it out."

"I—I—am very sorry," said Nancy in a low, broken voice ; "but—but even if this is so, Gilmore, you will still have money, you know."

These words made Gilmore more angry still.

"It's all very fine talking in that way," he said roughly ; "people like you who had nothing to lose to begin with, and have been accustomed to poverty all your life, speak very lightly of losing wealth and position. You are the

last person, too, I think, not to be completely upset by this, when, confound it, you have caused it all !”

Nancy made no answer to this cruel speech ; one moment she look in the face of the angry man, and that glance of silent reproach and pain made Gilmore feel rather ashamed of himself. But Nancy did not wait to hear him express this, if indeed he would have done so. She turned and left the room, and went to her own, and, having locked the door, burst into a very paroxysm of tears. But it was not for lost rank or wealth they were shed, though Nancy might not be indifferent to these things. But that Gilmore should speak thus—the lover, the husband of a few months, whom she had loved ! And presently she got up and bathed her eyes, with a strange new feeling in her heart. Gilmore had roughly swept away something he never could regain.

To do him justice he apologized to her during the evening, and when he saw her white face and violet-rimmed eyes, felt that he owed her one. He went up to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

“I am sorry if I said anything to vex you, little woman, but it’s enough to drive a man mad, isn’t it ?” he said.

“It is very terrible,” answered Nancy, without looking at him ; “but it may not be true.”

“Of course it’s not true—still I should not have blamed you—let us kiss and be friends ;” he stooped down and kissed her, but Nancy’s lips made no response, and Gilmore understood that the sting of his words still rankled in her heart.

The next morning he went down to Mr. Stafford’s offices, and was forced to admit in his own mind that the mass of evidence in favor of his brother’s claims was very strong.

Accompanied by Mr. Stafford, he then went to the chambers of one of the most eminent counsel in town, and this gentleman’s opinion was unfavorable to his own rights. He returned to his hotel, therefore, in a state of impatient anger he could not restrain. Mr. Stafford had advised him to see Lady Gilmore without delay, and had promised to consult further counsel on the case. Thus when he next saw Nancy he brusquely informed her that he was going to start at once for Wrothsley.

“Then I shall go to my mother’s until you return,” said Nancy.

"You shall do nothing of the kind," he answered; "you must stay on here, for I shall only be away a day or two; and there's another thing, Nancy, I cannot have those people of yours coming hanging about you."

"Do you mean I have not to see my own relations?" asked Nancy with some indignation.

"I mean I cannot have people like Mrs. Barclay, or whatever is her name, coming here. There has been enough mischief already, and I mean to try to persuade my mother to take you up."

Nancy bit her lips to suppress the angry words she could scarcely restrain. But Gilmore was in too great a hurry to notice this. He wanted to catch a certain train, and he had no time to lose, and he did not waste it in farewell words. He kissed Nancy, and gave her some money and went away, and the poor girl was left alone with her own sad and bitter thoughts.

But not for long. As she sat sad and silent during the afternoon, to her consternation "Mrs. Barclay" was announced, and Aunt Fannie, dressed in her best, and looking her very worst, was ushered in, and immediately began effusively kissing Nancy.

"I was determined to come the very first day to see you, my dear," she cried amid her embraces. "Your mother wished me to wait a little, but I would not listen to her, as I knew you would be glad to see me. But where is his lordship?"

"He has started for Wrothsley to see his mother," answered Nancy.

"And left you? Well, I suppose that is because she has been, and I believe is, so ill, for I see about her in the society papers, you know. But Nancy, my dear, as his lordship is away you cannot be left alone. I tell you what I'll do; I'll come and stay with you here until his return, and it will be a very nice little change for us both."

Poor Nancy! With Gilmore's parting words ringing in her ears, what was she to say to such an offer? She blushed, she hesitated, while Aunt Fannie went on making her arrangements.

"I will go back at once," she said, "and get what I shall want by way of dress, and be here again before dinner-time. I am so glad I thought of it, and we might go to one of the theatres to-night, Nancy."

"But, Aunt Fannie," said Nancy, now driven to desperation, "before he left, Lord Gilmore said I was to see no one, and go nowhere during his absence."

"He could not object to your own aunt I think, my dear," replied Mrs. Barclay, drawing up her stout little form.

"He said I was to make no exceptions," faltered Nancy.

"I—I really dare not ask you, Aunt Fannie."

Mrs. Barclay felt very indignant, but her respect for Lord Gilmore's rank forbade her to say what she thought of his conduct. She, however, did give Nancy one hint.

"There is just one little bit of advice I might give you, Nancy, for I was a wife for many years myself—never let a man think you are afraid of him, for if you do he will become a complete tyrant. You should hold your own, and let him know it; and before I would have put up with poor Barclay interfering with the visits of *my* relations, or indeed interfering at all, I should have made him repent it, I can tell you!"

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In the meanwhile, as the golden rays of the sinking sun flooded the vast park at Wrothsley, filling it with wondrous beauties of light and glory; Gilmore, pale and excited-looking, was passing through the fair heritage that he had once deemed so securely his.

His heart was very bitter within him. Never before had the green glades, the noble avenue of stately trees, the shining turrets of the great house his grandfather had built, on which the western rays now glinted, seemed so precious in his sight. He thought, too, of other properties belonging to this wealthy family—of the lochs, the salmon streams, and the deer forest, on the extensive estates in Scotland—of, in fact, a hundred gifts of fortune which had all been his. And if they should pass away? Something like a curse rose on his lips, for his soul was full of wrath.

He had driven from the station nearest Wrothsley in a hired carriage, but he had left this at the entrance of the park, meaning to walk up to the house; and as he went on he suddenly saw two men approaching him from an opposite direction. One of these, the butler Graham, he instantly recognized—but the other? In a moment it flashed on his mind who it might be, and as his stern eyes fell on his brother's features he bit his lips and grew

a shade paler than before, for it seemed to him almost as though he were again looking on his father's face!

On seeing him the obsequious Graham became actually agitated.

"Why, here's my lord!" he exclaimed, without thinking, and as the three met, Gilmore stopped.

"How is Lady Gilmore!" he asked haughtily of Graham.

"My lady is much better, my lor——" faltered the butler, and then he remembered and pulled himself up.

In the meanwhile Gerard had been looking somewhat nervously at the slender, graceful man before him, and understood that this was the brother who had enjoyed his birthright and borne his rightful name.

"I suppose," he said, addressing Gilmore with affected carelessness, "we ought to know each other—we are pretty near relations, aren't we?"

"I recognize no such relationship," said Gilmore, yet more haughtily; and without another word he moved on, leaving Gerard full of indignation.

"Well, of all the conceited stuck-up swells I ever came across he beats them!" he exclaimed, angrily. "A fellow, too, that's been robbing me all these years, he might have kept a civil tongue in his head!"

Thus from the first there was ill-blood between the two, and the evil Lady Gilmore had done was fated to rankle like poison in her children's hearts.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BROTHERS.

GILMORE walked on after this meeting in the park, with a frowning brow, and the bitterest emotions surging in his breast. The sight of Gerard—the likeness to his dead father—the bitter birthmark that had caused all this sin and sorrow, filled his soul with absolute loathing for his brother. And well he knew he was his brother! Not for one moment did Gilmore deceive himself after he had looked on Gerard's face. He remembered his father so well, and the strange horror of seeing the very features in life again that he had last seen cold in death, at once swept every real doubt from his mind.

And this low-bred cad would supplant him ! he reflected with extraordinary bitterness. Take his lands and his name, and leave him to the pity, perhaps the amusement, of the world. There was such fierce anger in Gilmore's heart as he thought of these things against his mother, that by the time he had reached the Castle he had forgotten all about her recent and dangerous illness ; had forgotten everything but his own wrongs, and his burning indignation against her.

With scant ceremony he spoke to one of the servants as he entered the magnificent house that used to be his own, and with hasty footsteps he passed up the broad staircase on his way to his mother's rooms. The servants looked after him half-pityingly and half-afraid. The story was known now, and "my lady's" temptation and cruel wrong to her two sons had been freely discussed we may be sure in the household. They looked after the gloomy-browed man, therefore, who had stalked into the hall, but no one dared to interfere with him, and a few moments later Graham, the butler, came in, looking pale and scared.

"Has he arrived?" he asked, breathlessly, and on receiving an answer in the affirmative he gravely shook his head.

"I wish there mayn't be some mischief, I am sure, between them," he muttered, and he also went upstairs, feeling it would be well that "my lady" should have some assistance near her.

In the meanwhile Gilmore had reached his mother's boudoir, and after a moment's hesitation he opened the door and went in. Lady Gilmore was lying back on a couch as he entered, and his entrance slightly startled her.

"Who is that?" she asked, peevishly ; "I did not ring."

"You may well ask who it is," answered Gilmore, gloomily ; and as the familiar voice fell on her ears she gave a half cry, turned her head round and sprang to her feet.

"Gilmore !" she exclaimed, in the excitement and agitation of the moment.

"I thought you had been affirming that I have no right to that name," he said, with great bitterness. "I have come to ask you, mother, what all this means?"

Lady Gilmore sank back with a moan on the couch as

he spoke, and covered her altered face with one of her shaking hands.

"That is so, that is so," she moaned. "Hugh, your brother is your father's eldest son."

"Then why," asked Gilmore, loudly and passionately, "if this be true, did you practice such a base deception? What good did you do by it; what object had you except to spoil two lives?"

Again an inarticulate sound of anguish escaped Lady Gilmore's quivering lips.

"I ask you why?" said Gilmore, yet more passionately.

Then Lady Gilmore's hand fell, and she looked at her son with haggard eyes.

"You may well ask," she said; "Hugh, in my mad love for your father and to please him, I committed this great sin. Not that he knew, no suspicion ever crossed his mind, he believed his eldest son was dead, the poor hunchback he despised, and it made him glad and happy to think this, for he was proud and fond of you, and hated the other."

"It was a mad act," said Gilmore, impatiently.

"It was, it was indeed! And not only mad, but a great and cruel wrong—and but for you—the secret would have died with me."

These words angered Gilmore excessively.

"But for me!" he repeated, indignantly. "I chose my own wife if you mean that, and I consider you have taken a contemptible revenge!"

Once more Lady Gilmore moaned aloud.

"And, moreover," went on Gilmore, "I don't choose to believe this romantic story, which I consider has been concocted between you and your priests because I took my own way and not yours. I think you have acted shamefully, that is the truth—most shamefully!"

He raised his voice angrily as he spoke, and Lady Gilmore started to her feet and stretched out her hands imploringly.

"Oh! spare me, spare me, my son," she prayed.

"And have you spared me," he retorted. "Look at the position you have placed me in, and now, without right or reason, you have brought this low-bred, and, for anything I know, low-born cad to try to supplant me! You had no right to bring this fellow here, and I'll dispute it in every Law Court in England, before——"

He never finished this sentence, for as he went on with loud voice and passionate gestures, Lady Gilmore suddenly gave a wild weird cry, and fell forward on the carpet at his feet. She was again stricken with paralysis, and as Gilmore raised her in his arms and looked at her ghastly distorted features and writhing limbs, his conscience smote him like a sharp sword.

He laid her on the couch near, and then rang violently for assistance, and a minute later Graham, who had been lingering in the adjoining corridor, ran hastily into the room.

"What is it, my lord?" he asked, forgetting Gerard's claim in his agitation; and then as his eyes, too, fell on Lady Gilmore's face, he gave a pitying exclamation.

"Oh! my poor lady!" he said; "she's taken another stroke!"

"Send for the doctors at once," said Gilmore hoarsely, who was now bending down and trying to rub his mother's stiffening hand. "Go at once and send the servants, the women—mother, do not look like that—mother, speak to me and say you are better now?"

But no words came from Lady Gilmore's twitching lips, and her expression was so dreadful that it was terrible to look upon her. Graham ran out of the room to call assistance, and for a moment or two Gilmore was alone with the stricken woman, whose restless, rolling eyes never left his face. But in vain he asked her to forgive him, to forget what he had said. If Lady Gilmore heard she made no sign, and Gilmore, who was shocked and afraid at what he had done, bent over her in momentarily increasing agitation.

A few minutes later some of the servants came hastily into the room; and then a gray-haired woman, who knelt down by Lady Gilmore's side, and took one of her hands and looked anxiously into her face. This was Mrs. Brewster, who had arrived at Wrothsley the day before after an absence of twenty-four years.

"My poor lady," she murmured, "I thought it would be too much for her."

Then, as she looked round for something she required for Lady Gilmore, her eyes fell on Gilmore, whom she had not seen since he was a little babe. Yet in a moment she guessed who it was, and understood what had brought on Lady Gilmore's second seizure.

"Is—she any better, do you think?" asked Gilmore with faltering tongue.

Mrs. Brewster shook her head.

"Not yet," she answered, "but I hope it will pass off."

"Mother," again said Gilmore, and as he spoke, Gerard, who had heard from Graham of his mother's illness, also entered the room, and once more the two brothers were face to face.

"What is the matter?" asked Gerard hastily.

"Hush, Gerard, she must be kept quite quiet," said Mrs. Brewster, unconsciously resuming her old authority over her foster child; but Gerard's face had grown very dark when he saw Gilmore.

"If I thought——" he began.

"Gerard, would you kill your mother?" said Mrs. Brewster, in a low tone, rising hastily from her knees, and putting her hand on the arm of her adopted son, "go out of the room, dear; this is no place for you."

But Gerard still looked defiantly at Gilmore, who, however, absolutely ignored his presence. But he had seen him, and the sight was gall and bitterness to his soul. He turned his head abruptly away, while Mrs. Brewster persuaded Gerard to leave the room, and then, after he was gone, again took his mother's now rigid hand.

And he thought—it might be fancy—but still he did think—that those cold, stiff fingers tried to press his, and this idea made him look yet more anxiously, more tenderly, at the changed face of her who had loved him so well. At all events he never left his mother's side until the little country doctor arrived who had attended him first after he had received his wound in the park, and who now hurried into the room, and proceeded at once to do what he could for Lady Gilmore.

Then Gilmore went away to summon other doctors from town by telegram, and he also telegraphed to Nancy the news of his mother's illness. He wrote these telegrams in the library, and then rang for Graham to send them at once, and Graham entered the room feeling that his present position was certainly a very trying one.

"Best call 'em both my lord until it's settled," he decided before his respectful entrance, and he proceeded to carry this out to the best of his abilities.

He took the telegrams in his hand, and then lingered a moment in the room.

"I was going to ask, my lord," he said very deferentially, "if your lordship would like your old suite of rooms prepared for present use?"

"Yes," answered Gilmore, briefly; "I shall of course stay on here until Lady Gilmore is better."

"I thought as much, my lord, and—will it please your lordship to dine with—the other gentleman?"

"No," said Gilmore abruptly, and he frowned, "I cannot; serve dinner for me in my own sitting-room."

Graham bowed most respectfully.

"I shall attend to it, my lord," he said, and then he left the room, and after he was gone, Gilmore frowned more darkly still.

Before the evening was over the doctors from town who had attended Lady Gilmore during her previous attack arrived, and Gilmore waited anxiously to hear their verdict.

It was so far favorable that they told him this seizure was not so severe as the first one.

"Lady Gilmore is of an excitable nature, you know, Lord Gilmore," said one of these physicians, "and this attack has probably been brought on by some mental strain. In future, the greatest possible care must be taken never to cause her any anxiety or worry; for I will not disguise from you that the third seizure will, in all probability, be fatal."

Gilmore bowed gravely at this intimation, and there was something in the doctor's manner as he gave it, that Gilmore's quick mind concluded that he meant it as a warning.

One of the London doctors stayed all night at Wrothsley, but the gloomy young man who remained during the rest of the evening shut up in his former suite of rooms, made no inquiries who entertained the physicians. Nor did he speak to the attentive Graham of the other young man who sat at the table where he had so long been master. The subject, indeed, was too bitter for words, and the sudden blow seemed to have changed Gilmore's whole nature. He who had been so careless, smiling, and indifferent to most things, now for the first time seemed to realize their full value. He never even went to see his little sisters, but spent the hours brooding darkly on what he felt sure he was about to lose.

Yet the next morning his heart grew softer, for the

London doctor sought him out, and told him there was a decided improvement in his mother's condition.

"And though Lady Gilmore's articulation is much affected," went on the doctor, "I have gathered from her that she is most anxious to see you. But let me warn you not to excite her in any way."

"Perhaps it is not me she wishes to see," said Gilmore bitterly, turning away his head.

"Yes," answered the doctor, "who understood Gilmore's allusion, "she repeated twice 'My son, Hugh,' and I believe that is your christian name, Lord Gilmore?"

"Yes," said Gilmore, still without looking in the doctor's face.

"It is most important, you know, that every wish of her's should be complied with at the present time, and I am sure you will gladly assist us to cure our patient?" smiled the urbane doctor.

"Of course," answered Gilmore, and so he followed the doctor to his mother's bedroom, and a wan smile flickered for a moment over the white distorted features of the stricken woman when she saw him.

"Well, Lady Gilmore," said the doctor cheerfully, "your son has come to wish you good-morning, you see, and I've been telling him how much better you are to-day."

But Gilmore's heart did not echo these words. The change was so great, so ghastly, in his mother's appearance, that it struck a vague and terrible fear into his breast.

Had he killed her? The mother who at one time at least had loved him so blindly. This thought darted through his heart like a knife as he bent over her, and took one of her cold, stiff hands in his.

The next moment Lady Gilmore's lips began to move, and she was evidently trying to speak.

"What is it, mother?" asked Gilmore, bending closer to her.

Then from that twitching tongue came two broken, scarcely articulate, words.

"Kiss—me."

He was affected, and pressed his lips on her face, and as he did so a gleam of joy shone in her dark eyes.

"Bring—your wife," presently Gilmore thought he heard her say.

"Do you wish me to bring Nancy?" he asked gently.

"Yes—write—don't go—don't leave me—any more."

Again he kissed her, and a strange moisture stole over his hazel eyes.

"I will write," he said: "Nancy will come, you must learn to love her for my sake, mother."

But the doctor, who had been looking out of the window, and pretending not to listen to the words passing between the stricken mother and her son, now approached to end this sad interview.

"I must not allow too much talking to-day, Lady Gilmore," he said, kindly and smilingly; and Gilmore took the hint, and after once more pressing his mother's hand, left the room.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NANCY'S RETURN.

WHEN Nancy received Gilmore's telegram to tell her of Lady Gilmore's sudden illness, she naturally carried it to her mother, and there was something in her manner when she spoke of her husband that filled Mrs. Loftus' heart with a vague uneasiness. Mrs. Loftus also had of course heard from indignant Aunt Fannie, that Gilmore had requested his wife not to entertain her family during his absence, and had concluded her story with these disheartening words:—

"I don't believe it's going to turn out well after all, Lucy. Nancy looks positively afraid of him, and I fear she's only a sad life before her, poor thing, in spite of all his money."

Thus when Nancy brought her telegram, Mrs. Loftus's fond eyes rested on her lovely blooming face with some anxiety, and there was a certain hardness—a difference in the tone of her voice somehow—when she spoke of Gilmore which her mother did not like to hear.

And presently Nancy confided to her mother, as the two sat together with clasped hands, the strange story of Lady Gilmore's eldest son; and though she did not tell her mother of Gilmore's hard words to herself on the subject, yet Mrs. Loftus gathered enough to learn that he

must have said something to Nancy which had hurt her greatly.

But this gentle woman was ever a peacemaker, and she had only soothing, tender words now for her young daughter's ears.

"If this story be true," she said, "it must be most painful and galling to Lord Gilmore, and it is only natural that he should be exceedingly indignant at his mother's conduct. It is a far greater injustice to him, you know, than to the other son, and I think nothing can excuse Lady Gilmore."

"She was so angry about our marriage I suppose," said Nancy, casting down her eyes.

"She is a foolish woman, then. Lord Gilmore behaved very nobly, for just think, darling, after Lady Gilmore's conduct to you, what our position would have been unless he had acted as he did."

These words were not without their due influence on Nancy's heart, and as she drove back to her hotel from Hampstead she had half-forgiven Gilmore his ungenerous speech. And the next day brought a letter from him couched in affectionate terms, and telling her of his mother's request that she should go to Wrothsley.

"You had best start by the mid-day train, dear Nancy," he wrote, "after you receive this, and you can write or telegraph to your mother that you are leaving town. Bring your maid down with you, and I will meet you at the station"; and so on.

But Nancy did not leave town without seeing her mother. She drove over to West Hampstead early in the morning, and Mrs. Loftus was pleased and proud to hear she was going to rejoin her husband beneath his mother's roof.

And she had a word of advice also to whisper into Nancy's ear.

"And don't forget, darling," she said with her hand on her daughter's shoulder, "that you cannot expect Lord Gilmore not to be upset and unlike himself if such a great change as this is to happen to his life. You must try to make up all his loss, dear Nancy, by your love and tenderness."

"Yes," said Nancy softly, and she kissed her mother, but was soon forced to leave her, happily before Aunt Fannie had appeared for the day, as she always now took her breakfast in bed.

And presently Nancy was speeding on her way to the great house, that she had first entered in the gloomy winter days of the previous year. Now the bright gladfulness of spring-time was over the earth, and the fields were green, and the birds sang amid the fresh young foliage. And as Nancy leaned back in the railway carriage thinking of many things, she knew that over her own heart, too, had passed a great and subtle change.

She had been a girl then, and she was a woman now, with a vague sadness over her soul that she could not quite explain. In truth she was disappointed in her husband, and the knowledge that he was not what she had believed him to be, seemed very hard to bear. Yet when she reached the station nearest Wrothsley, and saw Gilmore's tall slender form waiting for her on the platform, as she put her head out of the carriage window to smilingly greet him, she could not help feeling a little proud of him.

On either side of him were his two little sisters, who ran forward delighted to see Nancy again. Gilmore also seemed pleased to see her, and kissed her as he handed her out of the carriage, but Nancy saw in a moment he was looking ill and worried.

"And how is your mother to-day?" she asked, looking up in his face.

"She is improving they say, and I hope the attack is passing off—but it was terrible to see her."

"And we've got another brother now you know, Nancy," began Dossy, "such a funny looking little man."

"Hush dear," said Nancy, as she marked the frown deepen on Gilmore's brow.

"It is no matter," he said in a tone of great bitterness.

But Miss Dossy's prattling tongue would not be still, for no sooner had Gilmore handed them into the carriage that was waiting outside the station for them, than she again commenced her inappropriate remarks.

"We must show you our new governess, too, Nancy," she said; "she's such an ugly old thing, for mother said she would never have a pretty one again after you, and she's certainly done it this time."

Nancy laughed uneasily, for she saw his little sister's words annoyed Gilmore, and the next moment she stole her hand softly into his under the carriage rug, and Gilmore let it rest there, though he made no responsive pres-

sure. Yet, when Nancy, a little hurt, would have drawn her hand away, he still held it, and it rested in his when they drove into the wide park, where she remembered at this moment, with a little suppressed sigh, she had first looked on her husband's face.

When they reached the Castle, Nancy was most respectfully received by Graham and some of the other servants ; but Gilmore, after giving orders about the luggage drew her hand through his arm and led her to his own suite of rooms in the left wing. She looked round the luxuriously furnished sitting room when they were alone, with a smile, and again put her hand in his, for she had not forgotten her mother's words.

"So this is where you used to live, Gilmore?" she said.

"Yes," he answered, and he looked at her, but did not smile.

"I fear I have cost you a great deal," said Nancy, glancing up half timidly in his face.

"We can't help that now, Nancy," he said ; and the next moment he stooped down and kissed her cheek, but it was not like Gilmore's kisses long ago !

And a minute later he began to talk almost passionately of his wrongs.

"I would not mind giving up the title and the property so much, though that is bad enough," he said, beginning to pace the room with hasty and irregular step ; "but to be supplanted by a low-bred cad, for this Gerard is nothing better, is certainly too disgusting !"

"But it is not certain yet, is it?" asked Nancy quickly.

"But what can I do?" said Gilmore, angrily. "My hands are tied, that's the truth, by my mother's illness. If I bring the case into the law courts she would have to give evidence, and evidence against my claims, too ; and the doctors have all warned me that any excitement might be fatal to her ; and I should not like to have her death to answer for."

"Oh, no ; far best give it up without a struggle."

"That's very easy talking, but not so easy doing. Give up my name, the very house we are standing in, and a large fortune, to a fellow of whom I know nothing ! If his claim were even just ; he has not been brought up to hold the position, and I cannot see he has any right to it."

Yet Gilmore knew very well as he spoke these words that his brother had a full right both to the property and

the name. He had had a letter in the morning from Mr. Stafford, the lawyer, who told him that he had heard from the confidential clerk, whom he had despatched to Scarley to make inquiries regarding Mrs. Brewster and Gerard, and that there was no doubt that Mrs. Brewster had arrived in that village twenty-four years ago, bringing with her a hunchbacked child, and also that she was accompanied by a lady, who shortly afterwards left her and never returned. But Mrs. Brewster and the child remained and the hunchbacked boy had grown up in the village, and had never left it except to go to school in the adjoining town, returning every Saturday and staying until the Monday. Dozens of the villagers of Scarley were ready and willing to swear to his identity ; the elder ones remembering his arrival, and the younger ones having played with him on the seashore from his childhood to his boyhood, and now knew him in his young manhood. In fact, Mr. Stafford had not disguised from Gilmore that in his opinion, and also that of two eminent barristers whom he had consulted, that he believed that Lady Gilmore could without difficulty substantiate the claims of her eldest son in any law court in England ; and he added also that his advice would be for Gilmore to make the best terms he could regarding the division of the property, and if possible to keep on good terms with his brother.

And Gilmore having read these words, knew also that if he carried his claims to the law, that he would kill his mother ; the mother that he had already struck down twice, and he felt that it would be impossible for him to do so. But all the same, this did not lessen the bitterness of the sacrifice. And he had an inward consciousness, too, that if he fought the battle he would lose it, after probably seeing his mother die before his eyes !

Thus in a very bitter and dissatisfied mood he had gone to meet his young wife at the station ; and yet he had meant to be kind to her, just as she had meant to be kind to him.

And while he was still speaking loudly and angrily against Gerard to Nancy, a message was brought to their rooms from Lady Gilmore, to tell them she would be pleased to receive her "son's wife." Nancy felt not a little nervous at the prospect of this interview, but a few minutes later, when she entered the sick-room of the stricken lady, leaning on her husband's arm, all feelings

passed away from her heart but intense pity. There lay the woman whom she had last seen strong, well, and enraged, standing before her, and bidding her leave the house, in cruel and insulting words, and now—ah! poor Lady Gilmore! Could this pallid, distorted face, those restless, glassy eyes, the blue-tinted, discolored lips be hers? Yet it was so, and as Gilmore led Nancy forward towards the bed, where his mother sat propped up with pillows, to receive them, he felt her hand trembling violently on his arm, so shocked was Nancy at the great, sad change.

"I have brought Nancy to see you, mother," said Gilmore, trying to speak lightly, and he held out Nancy's shaking hand and laid it on his mother's which was lying outside the coverlet.

Lady Gilmore's lips instantly began to twitch, as her eyes fell on the lovely face of her son's wife.

"Mother is going to say something to you, Nancy," said Gilmore.

"For—give—me," now pitiably faltered forth from that stricken tongue.

These words so affected Nancy's kind heart that she at once flung herself on her knees and took Lady Gilmore's hand in her own and kissed it.

"Nay," she said, with that charming manner of hers, "it is I who ought to ask forgiveness, Lady Gilmore. I know it was very wrong to meet Gilmore, and yet——"

She looked so beautiful as she raised her dark, dewy eyes pleadingly to the face of her husband's mother, that Gilmore, who was watching her, felt a wave of his old passionate love and admiration for her sweep over his heart. He laid his hand caressingly on her shoulder; he pushed back her bright hair from her brow.

"I was the chief sinner," he said smilingly; "this little woman, mother, was most unwilling, I assure you, to meet me at all. I used to pester you sadly, didn't I, Nancy, in those days?"

She turned round and smiled at him, and Lady Gilmore saw their eyes meet, and remembered perhaps the days when her own heart had also beat with youth and love. At all events there was peace between them, and before Nancy left she asked leave to be allowed sometimes to come and read to Lady Gilmore.

"I am afraid I have not many accomplishments," she

said, smiling sweetly ; “but my poor father used to say I could read aloud fairly well, Lady Gilmore, and I shall be so pleased to read to you.”

Lady Gilmore signified her acceptance of this offer, and Gilmore was satisfied with the impression that Nancy had made upon his mother.

“I think she will get to like you,” he said, as they walked along the corridor together after leaving Lady Gilmore’s bedroom. “Ah, what a pity it was, Nan, but it’s no use talking of it.”

And the next morning, shortly after breakfast, Nancy kept her promise and again went to see Lady Gilmore. But before she did so she asked her husband to go with her to the conservatories to gather some flowers for the invalid.

“I feel too shy to go by myself, you know,” she said, and Gilmore went with her, and Nancy cut a lovely posey, all of roses, as she had once heard Lady Gilmore say the rose was her favorite flower. As she flitted among the gorgeous blossoms, Gilmore suddenly remembered their first meeting here, and the lovely, girlish face that he had then thought fairer than the flowers. He went up to her and put his arm through hers and reminded her of that day, but Nancy had not forgotten it.

“Do you remember, little woman, when we first came here?” he said.

“Yes,” answered Nancy, looking at him.

“Ah, well—” said Gilmore ; but the next moment he added ; “See, I’ll give you a flower in memory of it.”

Nancy thanked him with a smile, and placed the flower near her shapely throat.

“Do you know I think I’ll go to town to-day, and see that fellow Stafford,” went on Gilmore. “This cursed uncertainty is worse than anything I think ; I nearly met that cad this morning, and if it’s settled he stays here as master, we must be out of this.”

“But your mother—”

“Oh, I want you to get great friends with my mother if you can manage it ; of course, we cannot leave while she continues in her present state—do you think you could break to her, when you take the flowers, that I want to run up to town to-day ?”

“I will try—but you won’t be long away, will you ?”

“I’ll be back to-night, or if I cannot get away to-night I will telegraph to you, and return to-morrow.”

And Gilmore carried out this plan, and left to Nancy the rather trying task of telling Lady Gilmore he was going to town. She found the invalid a shade better, and Lady Gilmore tried to smile when Nancy entered her room carrying the flowers, looking herself as fresh and lovely as any of them.

"I remembered you liked roses," she said prettily, and then she began to arrange them about the room, and Lady Gilmore's eyes followed her as she did this.

"Hugh," she said presently with a blush, calling her husband for the first time to Lady Gilmore by his Christian name, "is talking of going up to town for a few hours to-day?"

"Why?" asked Lady Gilmore with some agitation.

"He has some business to see after," answered Nancy, who dare not mention lawyers for fear of exciting Lady Gilmore; "but he will be back to-night."

Lady Gilmore said nothing more, and presently Nancy began to read the newspapers to her in her sweet-toned, pleasant voice, and Lady Gilmore lay back and closed her eyes. Gilmore found them thus when he went in to bid his mother good-bye before he started for town. He paid her a very brief visit, for he also was afraid of her exciting herself, and was glad to get out of the room without being asked any questions.

"Nancy here will take great care of you until I come back," he said, as he kissed his mother, and then he kissed Nancy.

"Good-bye, Nan, for a few hours," he said, but as she followed him to the door of the room, he stooped down and whispered a few words in her ear.

"I will telegraph if I can't get away," he said; and as Nancy returned to the bed-side, she forced back a little sigh.

Lady Gilmore grew more restless after he had gone, and to amuse her and divert her mind, Nancy went for the children, and found Dossy's description of the new governess by no means an exaggerated one. Nature indeed had been in one of her most niggard moods when she formed this poor lady's harsh, strange features. She was gaunt, she was gray-tinted, and yet not an unkindly light shone from those small gray eyes which had met no look of love nor admiration all her days. A sorrowful fate this—cold and sad—and yet many women share it, and

pass through life in silent endurance of the knowledge that their ill looks have marred their happiness.

"This is Miss Pennythorne," cried Dossy, starting up from her lessons, as Nancy entered the schoolroom; "and this," she added, as she kissed Nancy, "used to be our governess before you, you know, Miss Pennythorne, but now she is my brother's wife, aren't you, Nancy?"

"Yes," said Nancy, smiling.

Miss Pennythorne rose and bowed, and then Nancy saw how very unattractive she was. Her face was so plain, and her figure tall, flat, and shapeless, a contrast indeed to the last governess, who now stood and looked round the familiar room, and thought of the many hours she had spent there, and of the sweet dreams of dawning love which here first had fluttered in her breast.

"Will you let me take your young pupils to their mother for a little while?" asked Nancy with her pretty smile.

"If Lady Gilmore wishes it, certainly," answered Miss Pennythorne in a deep, strong voice; "but I think it a pity to disturb the hours of study at this time of the morning."

"Still, as Lady Gilmore is an invalid——"

"That of course makes a great difference," said Miss Pennythorne, and then, for the first time, Nancy noticed that there was a kindly look in the small eyes. "I trust her ladyship feels a little better this morning?"

"Yes, I hope she is, and I thought the children would enliven her a little," said Nancy; and then remembering how dreary it used to be here, before she knew Gilmore, she added kindly, "this room reminds me so much of old days, Miss Pennythorne; I should like to come and talk to you sometimes if I may?"

And the gaunt woman she addressed absolutely colored with pleasure through her gray skin.

"I shall be very glad," she said; and while her eyes followed Nancy's graceful figure as she left the room, she thought with sadness but not bitterness of their different fates.

"No wonder he loved her, with that beautiful face," she reflected and she sighed. Perhaps she too had had her girlish dreams, perhaps she too had once mused on love!"

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During the afternoon of the same day, while Nancy was again sitting reading to Lady Gilmore, a rap came to the bedroom door, and when the nurse rose to open it a gentleman walked in and went up to the bedside, and took Lady Gilmore's hand in his.

"How are you to day?" he said.

"I am better, Gerard," answered Lady Gilmore's faltering voice, and in a moment Nancy knew who it was. This was the other son, the brother Gilmore hated and scorned, and Nancy's breath came quickly, and her heart beat fast. She scarcely, indeed, knew what to do, but when Gerard turned round and looked at her she gave a slight nervous bow.

"Gerard—she is your brother's wife," said Lady Gilmore, and then Gerard shyly held out his hand, which Nancy took.

"I am very glad to know you," he said.

"I am very glad," smiled Nancy; indeed, Gerard's face was so pleasant and handsome that Nancy was most agreeably surprised, and Gerard also was charmed with the appearance of his young sister-in-law.

They talked together for the next half-hour, and Lady Gilmore listened, well pleased. Her most ardent desire now was that her two sons should become friends—brothers indeed—and she was glad to see that Gerard and Nancy mutually liked each other. At last Nancy rose to go, and when Gerard went to the door of the room to open it for her, he said half-wistfully, half-shyly :

"I—I—wish you would dine with me, to-day, as—Hugh is away."

Nancy smiled, hesitated, and finally shook her head.

"I think I had better not," she said; but she took Gerard's hand and then went to her own rooms, and there found that a telegram from her husband awaited her.

"Find I cannot get back, to night," she read, and that was all.

CHAPTER XXVII.

UNDER-CURRENTS.

NANCY met Gerard again the next morning as she was passing down one of the corridors on her way to Lady Gilmore's rooms, and he at once stopped, smiled pleasantly, and shook hands with her.

"I am so glad I've met you," he said. "May I turn with you, for I've got something I want to say to you?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Nancy, with a smile.

"Well," went on Gerard, in his blunt way, "mother and I had a talk about you after you left her room yesterday, and we both think that you could do a great deal to patch up this unfortunate business between—my brother and myself. You see I'm sorry for the poor fellow, awfully sorry, because there is no doubt it is tremendously hard lines for him, but on the other hand he can't expect me to give up my just rights, can he?"

"No, but he may not think they are just, you know," said Nancy, with a little hesitation.

"He must know they are," said Gerard quickly. "Mother had no possible motive for telling all this, except that when she was so ill she felt she must speak the truth. And it nearly broke Mrs. Brewster's heart to speak it, too, I can tell you! You see she had brought me up and all that, and the old woman is fond of me, and for the matter of that I am fond of her, though it makes a difference knowing she is not one's real mother."

"That is only natural," answered Nancy, to whom this conversation was very embarrassing.

"Oh! it does, you know—well, as I was saying, mother says Hugh is most awfully fond of you, and that's no wonder, Nancy—if you will let me call you Nancy?"

"Oh, yes."

"And she thinks you could influence Hugh to act sensibly about all this. As I said I am most awfully sorry for him, and I don't wonder at him being a bit sore, but he was downright rude to me you know the only time I

ever spoke to him, and since then he has ignored my humble existence."

"He has been very much put out, and it was all such a great surprise to him."

"Oh, I quite understand all that, and I for one am ready to let bygones be bygones. But what I want you to explain to him, if you will be so good, is that I think his position is a very hard one, but then, you see, that's no fault of mine; and for mother's sake I think that we had far best come to some peaceable arrangement. And I for my part, though I cannot give up the title without making a fight for it, because to do that would be to make out I was not my father's eldest son, which I am. But though I cannot do this, I am perfectly ready and willing to share the property between us; or if this cannot be done exactly, on account of some entail business, to agree that Hugh should have a large income settled upon him and his heirs forever!" And Gerard gave a little laugh.

"It is very good of you," said Nancy, with a blush.

"Oh no, not at all good; but I hate the feeling of there being such bad blood between us, especially since I have seen you, Nancy, and found out what a pretty little sister-in-law I have got."

"Well, I will do all I can, Gerard; and for Lady Gilmore's sake I do not think Hugh will take the affair to law."

"He would only lose it if he did, Nancy. You see it's plain sailing enough for me, and Father Hayward says all the London lawyers said so. And it would kill mother, too; she's awfully fond of Hugh—that's the truth, and I believe never would have told all this if she hadn't taken a fit. But she thought she had been struck down as a punishment, and she dare not die unless she told the truth. She wrote me such a letter to tell me all this, and I fancy Father Hayward keeps her up in the idea a bit." And again Gerard laughed.

"And you,—do you like the change, Gerard?" asked Nancy, looking at him.

"Of course, I do! If we were all settled and happy together I should be as jolly as anything. This house is settled on mother, you know, for her lifetime, and I expect she'll ask you and Hugh to live on here, and I am sure I hope you will at any rate, and I'm certain we'll be good friends."

"You have settled it all," said Nancy, smiling.

"That's my way, you know," laughed Gerard. "And I like the old lady, too, and don't want to worry her by letting her know that Hugh and I are such bad friends."

"I must try to make peace between you."

"Yes, you try, and you're sure to succeed; no man could resist your pretty ways, I think, Nancy."

Nancy laughed.

"You are quite a flatterer, Gerard," she said.

"I admire pretty women," said Gerard, delighted with his own compliments and ease of conversation; "you see, though I was brought up in a little seaside, out-of-the-way place like Scarley, blood will come out. They say all the Gilmores were fond of handsome women, and I've inherited that trick anyhow."

It was all Nancy could do to help laughing at this, as she noted the self-satisfied expression which beamed over Gerard's good-looking face as he made this announcement. He was indeed on very good terms with himself, and his London tailor had certainly greatly improved his general appearance. If it had not been for the unfortunate deformity of the spine, he would in truth have been a remarkably handsome young man. As it was, there was nothing repulsive about him, and his extraordinary likeness to his dead father struck everyone who looked on his face.

"I was going to read to Lady Gilmore when I met you," presently said Nancy.

"Let's go together, then," answered Gerard, in that rough, though kindly tongue of his. "Hugh didn't come back from London last night, did he?"

"No, there was a telegram from him to say he couldn't get."

"So the butler fellow told me; I say, Nancy, he's a sly old dog that."

"He's a most polite man, I think," laughed Nancy.

"Oh, he's paid for being polite, you know, that all comes into his day's wages; but he's a deep one, and can see round the corner a bit."

"A most desirable accomplishment in the world, Gerard."

"I suppose it is—well, here we are at the old lady's door; shall I rap or will you?"

Nancy rapped softly, and the door was opened by Mrs. Brewster, who had been talking to Lady Gilmore, and

when Gerard saw her he caught hold of his foster-mother's hand, and pulled her into the corridor.

"Come here, you dear old woman," he said, "and be introduced to this pretty young lady, who is my sister-in-law you know, and we've got to be quite great friends already. Nancy, this is Mrs. Brewster, who brought me up."

Mrs. Brewster made a respectful courtesy, but Nancy held out her hand to the old family servant, who had been so strangely connected with Gerard's life.

"She's not a bad old woman," said Gerard, laying his hand affectionately on Mrs. Brewster's shoulder, who looked at him with proud, admiring, even grateful, eyes, that he should thus speak of her to his brother's young wife.

"I am sure you took very good care of him," said Nancy, gracefully.

"I did my best, my lady," answered Mrs. Brewster, with another courtesy, "and—he made all the brightness and happiness of my life."

"There now, don't begin to cry over it," said Gerard, good-naturedly; "you did your best to spoil me, you know, and it's a wonder I'm as good as I am."

But at this moment the trained nurse who was attending on Lady Gilmore came to the door of the room and said that Lady Gilmore wished to know who was talking outside.

Then Nancy and Gerard entered the sick-room together, and the poor invalid looked pleased when she saw them.

"And—Hugh?" she inquired presently.

Upon this Nancy explained: Hugh had been unable to return last night, she said, but she expected him to-day. If, however, Nancy did expect him he never came, and the evening's post brought her a letter from her husband, which was as follows:—

"Dear Nancy,—I could not get back last night nor yet to-day, for I have been and am so occupied about this disgusting affair that it may be some days now before I return. I saw Stafford the lawyer at once when I got to town yesterday, and also consulted some of the big-wigs on the point of that cad's identity being disproved. But I got cold comfort for my pains, and it seems there is no doubt that the hunchback has always lived at this northern village, where my mother says she took him in his

infancy. In fact these lawyers as good as told me that I should lose the case if I fought it. I will therefore send Stafford down to Wrothsley, and see what terms can be arranged with the fellow. In the meantime, if you see him, you had best be civil to him, though I feel it will be impossible for me ever to be so. I trust my mother is keeping better : please give my love to her, and with love

“I remain,

“Affectionately yours,

“G——”

He had not written his usual signature “Gilmore,” and Nancy understood the bitterness of heart which prevented him doing this. He still bore the name in the world, but he knew he had no right to it, and after as good as acknowledging this in his letter he would not use it. She therefore at once sat down and wrote to him, and she did this in very tender words.

“My dearest Hugh,—I was very glad to receive your letter, though much disappointed that I shall not see you to-day, for I fully expected to do so. Strange to tell, yesterday I met Gerard for the first time in your mother’s room. He was very kind and nice when Lady Gilmore introduced me to him as “your wife”; and again to-day I met him by accident in one of the corridors, and he asked me if he might turn with me as he had something he wished to say. He did turn with me, and what he wished to say was this. He is most anxious to be friends with you, and though he could not give up his claim to the title, he said he thinks all this has been, and is, most dreadfully hard on you, though it is of course through no fault of his, he said. And he proposes that some friendly arrangement should be arrived at between you, and that a large income should be settled on you out of the property. Thus you see there will be no difficulty in Mr. Stafford coming to terms with him, and really, dearest Hugh, he seemed very kind-hearted and nice. I do so hope that all this sad business will be arranged peaceably, and I am sure he wishes this so much, too. Your mother, I am most happy to tell you, is brighter and better to-day, and seems very anxious for your return also. Do come back soon.

“Your loving NANCY.”

Gilmore (for we must yet call him so) received this letter on the following morning at his hotel, and read it with a gloomy brow.

“So even she is beginning to run after this fellow, and take his part,” he thought bitterly; and he thought bitterly, too, at this moment, how much Nancy had cost him. And, by-and-bye, he carried her letter with him to the lawyer’s, and told Mr. Stafford as much of its contents as he thought necessary to relate.

“Well, I think the young man is acting very uprightly,” said Mr. Stafford; “of course, we cannot expect him to relinquish his father’s name: and if he is willing to settle a large income upon you, that also is but just.”

Gilmore’s handsome lips curled.

“The lawyer, too,” he was thinking, “is after the rising sun—soon they will all be.”

But he kept his reflections to himself, and had a long conversation with the lawyer respecting the vast sums of money that belonged to the House of Gilmore.

“Would you be satisfied with ten thousand a year?” asked Mr. Stafford, and Gilmore shrugged his shoulders at the question.

“It’s a nice come down, isn’t it?” he said. “Suppose we try for fifteen thousand a year, and the Scottish property, as that is not entailed, for my father bought it, not the old man.”

“Well, we can try; when shall I go down to Wrothsley then and see this young gentleman?”

“As soon as you conveniently can; it would be well now, I think, if it were all settled.”

“Yes, but, of course, there will be delays—the law’s delay,” smiled Mr. Stafford, but Gilmore did not smile in return, but left the lawyer’s office, gloomy-browed as he had entered it.

After this he went to one of his clubs, and saw, or fancied he saw, his acquaintances looking covertly and curiously at him. The strange story of his elder brother’s re-appearance had in truth crept out, and, though his friends did not speak of it to him, there were many odd tales afloat, and the heart of the Honorable Kate Butler rejoiced within her when she heard them.

And there was another heart—a heart that Gilmore had well-nigh broken in his careless youth—that these rumors had also reached, filling it with passionate joy, at one

moment that a just punishment had befallen him, and at other moments with vague, eager longings to comfort and console the lover who had been false to her.

Did he go blindly or willingly to his fate this afternoon, when about four o'clock he drove in a hansom to a certain house in St. George's Road, S.W., and stopped at a door on which "Dr. Robertson" was engraved? He had corresponded with this doctor occasionally ever since he had received the mysterious letter at Wrothsley during his illness after he was wounded, to which he had been compelled by his weakness to ask his mother to reply to. He had sent large sums of money from time to time after this to Dr. Robertson, and had seen him once, and now he was going to make some inquiries which he considered he was bound by honor to do.

A small brougham was standing before the doctor's door as he drew up, but this moved on to make way for his hansom; and just as he ascended the door-steps, just as his hand was touching the bell, the door opened, and Dr. Robertson and a lady appeared from within.

What made Gilmore start and grow pale as his eyes fell on that woman's face? She was tall, dark, and handsome, and looked worn and ill, and no sooner did she see Gilmore than she staggered back, a half-cry escaped her lips, and she would have fallen, but the doctor caught her in his arms.

"Are you ill?" he said, hastily. "Mrs. Ferrars, what is the matter?"

But no word came from her pale lips; she had fainted with the sudden shock of seeing Gilmore, and the doctor perceiving this, and not at the moment recognizing Gilmore, asked him to assist him to carry her back into the house.

"This poor lady has fainted, I see," he said, "so perhaps you will kindly help me to carry her into my consulting-room. She has been very ill for some months, but I did not expect such a sudden attack as this."

Then Gilmore advanced, and placed one of his shaking hands below her arm, and between the two men the fainting woman was borne into the consulting-room, which happily was on the ground floor. When there, they laid her on a couch, and the doctor proceeded to endeavor to revive her, but five or six minutes passed before she showed any signs of life.

As the doctor was sprinkling her face with water, and applying strong essences to her nostrils, he chanced to look at Gilmore, and it was now his turn to start.

"Lord Gilmore!" he said in a tone of great surprise.

"Has she been ill?" asked Gilmore, in a faltering voice, who was greatly shocked by the change in the white, altered face lying before him.

"She has been very ill for some months," answered the doctor in a low tone; "she had scarcely recovered the effect of her wound, when—— But at present it is unwise to speak of it."

The unfortunate woman by this time had begun to heave deep and apparently painful sighs, and tears gathered beneath her white eyelids, and rolled down her pale cheeks. Then she opened her large dark eyes—eyes that would have made any face attractive, if not beautiful: they were so lustrous and full of power—and fixed them on Gilmore's face.

"Alice," he said, bending over her, and taking her hand, "are you any better now?"

She did not answer; still she kept looking at him, as if she were uncertain about something—as if in doubt.

"Yes, you are better now, Mrs. Ferrars," said the doctor; "try to swallow this, and it will revive you."

But she took no heed, and never moved her eyes from Gilmore, and then presently with a sigh she put her hand wearily to her head.

"Am I dreaming?" she said, in a weak, low voice, "or is it really you—Gilmore?"

"It is really me," he answered. "I am sorry I startled you so, Alice."

"I have been so ill, you know—I used to fancy things—and I thought perhaps when I saw you it was fancy too."

"I am very sorry indeed you have been so ill," said Gilmore earnestly; "I came here to-day to ask after you—it was strange we should meet."

Again the woman sighed, and again her dark eyes sought his face.

"And you," she said, "you too look ill—are you ill, Gilmore?"

"I have been desperately worried lately," he answered. "I think there is nothing but trouble and worry in the world, Alice."

"And great pain," she said, slowly.

Gilmore turned away his head with a restless gesture.

"Let me persuade you to take this, now, Mrs. Ferrars," urged the doctor, who was standing near with a restorative poured out ready in a wine-glass; "it will make you feel ever so much stronger."

She put out her hand, and the doctor assisted her to raise the glass to her lips, and then she swallowed it.

"It will pull you together," said the doctor, kindly.

She sat still and silent for a few minutes after this, and then she rose half-tottering to her feet. "I ought to be going now," she said, "going——"

Gilmore put out his hand and caught her arm. "Lean on me," he said, "you are not strong enough to walk yet, Alice. Stay a little while longer, and then I shall see you safely home."

"*You ?*" she asked, in a sort of thrilling whisper.

"Yes, of course; do you suppose I should allow you to go alone?"

"You had better wait a little while, Mrs. Ferrars," said the doctor, "and then if it is not convenient to Lord Gilmore to go with you I can take you home."

"It is quite convenient to me," said Gilmore a little haughtily. "As soon as you feel able to go, Alice, I will take you. Was that your carriage at the door?"

"Yes," she answered in a low tone; and a few minutes later, leaning on Gilmore's arm, she passed out of the house, and after he had handed her into the brougham he seated himself by her side.

They drove on in silence for a few moments, and then with a sudden outburst of passionate emotion the woman clasped his hand.

"Will you ever forgive me, Gilmore?" she cried. "But remember I wished to die—I tried to die!"

"Hush! do not talk of the past," he answered, gently; "you have suffered enough. Alice—try to forget it all."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOOKING BACKWARDS.

A DAY later Mr. Stafford, the family lawyer, arrived at Wrothsley, and had a prolonged interview with Gerard, and also with Father Hayward, and during this interview Gerard showed much generosity concerning the division of the property with his younger brother Hugh.

"It's awfully hard on the poor fellow, you know," he said to Mr. Stafford, frankly, "and if he's willing not to fight the case for our mother's sake, I am willing as far as possible that everything should be equally divided between us—except, of course, my father's name."

"Your sentiments do you great honor," replied the cautious lawyer, "but you must remember that if you become the head of the house that you will have claims on your income, which any one holding the position of a younger son will not have; and by your late grandfather's will, the first Lord Gilmore, the whole of the property which he held during his life-time is entailed on the direct heir, and therefore in this arrangement cannot be interfered with."

"But my brother must have an income," said Gerard, hastily.

"Certainly; a large income is absolutely due to him, as by this unhappy act of Lady Gilmore's he is placed in a peculiarly trying and unfortunate position; but as regards land there is the Scottish property which is unentailed."

"Well, let him have that then," said Gerard.

"But it is part of the landed property, and should belong to the rightful heir, should it not?" said Father Hayward quickly.

"No, my dear sir, if the rightful heir is ready and willing to resign it to a brother placed in such a peculiar position as our friend, who now bears the title of Lord Gilmore," retorted the bland lawyer. "We must consider that neither of these young gentlemen are to blame in the slightest degree for the circumstances in which they find themselves; and if, for their mother's sake, and out of

consideration for the delicate condition of her health, they are anxious to avoid taking the case into the Law Courts, there must necessarily be some sacrifice on either side."

"Of course, I quite understand that," said the priest; "and it would doubtless kill Lady Gilmore if she were now called upon to give direct evidence in the witness-box."

"Precisely; her deposition, and the whole circumstances of the case will, however, have to be laid before a Committee of the House of Lords before you, sir," and he looked smilingly at Gerard, "can assume the title of Lord Gilmore, or take your seat in Parliament as a Peer of the Realm. It will, in fact, have to be proved to the satisfaction of the Lords' Committee that you are actually the eldest son of the late Lord Gilmore before you can do this. But the evidence is so direct that I have no fear of the result; and in the meanwhile it is well to come to some peaceable arrangement with your brother. Am I to understand, then, that you are willing to resign the Scottish property?"

"Most certainly," said Gerard, with decision.

"So far well, then, this will not leave him entirely without property, but these Scottish acres, though of some extent and valuable to a sportsman, do not bring in a large revenue. Now, let us consider about the income you are prepared to settle on him, should your claims to the peerage be established."

But we need not go into any further details.

Gerard was quite ready to settle any income that the lawyers thought just and even generous on his brother; and Mr. Stafford judiciously kept before his mind's eye that his claims were not yet fully established, and that they had to be proved before a Committee of the House of Lords before they could be. But on the whole he favorably impressed the acute man of law, who, when he returned to town, saw Gilmore and related his success with Gerard with satisfaction.

"After all," he said, looking at Gilmore with a smile, "your position in any case is a very enviable one. You are the Honorable Hugh Gifford, with a fine income of, let us say, fifteen thousand a year, a deer forest and trout stream, I believe unrivalled in Scotland, and also, we must not forget, you are the direct heir to the whole property. With your brother's unfortunate personal deformity

he will probably never marry, and he will also probably not live long, at least, as a rule, deformed people do not ; and it is very much better that you should be on friendly terms with him, and he is certainly anxious to be good friends with you."

But Gilmore expressed no answering sentiments of goodwill. The necessary steps to establish Gerard's claim to the title were to be at once commenced, and he did not mean to oppose them, for his mother's sake he told himself, though a "still small voice" whispered in his ear it was also because he knew his opposition would not avail him. And strange, after he left Mr. Stafford's offices, the words of the lawyer, which he remembered most distinctly and which recurred most frequently to his mind were, that Gerard might die.

"Would to God he was dead," he thought, vindictively, "his life is a curse to mine."

He lingered in town two days after Mr. Stafford returned from Wrothsley, though he had no especial reason for doing so. But so intense was his dislike to the idea of again meeting Gerard in their changed positions, that, though it stung his pride to the quick to know that his story was now almost public property, and that if people still addressed him as Lord Gilmore, it was fairly well known he had no real right to the title ; yet he still even preferred the annoyances that this entailed to once more encountering the brother he so bitterly hated and despised.

And during these two days also he went to see the dark-eyed woman who had only loved him too well. It was a strange meeting between these two, and carried Gilmore's thoughts back to the days of his early manhood, when he had encountered abroad in her lovely prime a young girl, half-English, half-Spanish (for her father had married an Andalusian), and this girl's beautiful face had soon won his ardent and fickle fancy. He was travelling at this time with a private tutor, and probably this gentleman thought it was his duty to give Lady Gilmore a hint of her young son's infatuation. At all events, to Gilmore's surprise and consternation, his mother suddenly joined him in Spain, and remained with him until he returned to England.

But there were stolen interviews and whispered vows of which the mother knew not, and though Lady Gilmore imagined at the time that she had taken her son safely

out of the way of temptation, she had not done so until the dark-eyed girl he loved had promised to follow him to England. Her English father, who had held some appointment as engineer at one of the Spanish mines, was dead, and she was living with her mother's relations, and though she bore the English name of Alice Ferrars, she had all the strong characteristics of the women of her mother's race. Beautiful, passionate, loving, she had given her whole heart to the young English lord, who had wooed her beneath the orange groves in the dusky hours of her glowing clime. She escaped from the surveillance of her friends, and they were too lazy or too indifferent to seek to follow her, for she was a penniless orphan, and had chosen her own fate they said with a shrug. Gilmore in his boyish ardor had promised to marry her, and the poor girl implicitly trusted to his honor. He had supplied her with money for her secret flight, and after various adventures she reached London safely, where Gilmore joined her, and for a while her beauty and tenderness, and the romance which hallowed their love, made him completely devoted to her.

But alas, alas!—she was almost totally uneducated, her rank was completely beneath his, for neither on her father's nor her mother's side did she come of gentle blood. She was in fact little better than a beautiful peasant girl, and it gradually dawned on Gilmore's mind that to marry her would be to hang a millstone round his neck, which would sink him in social importance forever.

And so time drifted on, and three years passed away and his promise of marriage was still unfulfilled. She had borne this if not uncomplainingly, with a certain loving patience which might have moved the heart of a nobler man. But about this time a new instinct arose in her breast—an instinct strong, natural, and passionate as her love for her young lover. She was about to become a mother, and for the sake of the unborn child she insisted that Gilmore should marry her. He now felt that this would be impossible; his love had waned, and he told himself that, by birth, education, everything, she was totally unfitted to be his wife. He grew tired of her constant appeals; he left town and went to stay at Wrothley with his mother, where he never for a moment contemplated that she dare follow him.

But he had not reckoned on the warm Southern blood

flowing in her veins, or the strong maternal instinct which filled her untutored heart. One dusky November afternoon a note was brought to him to tell him that she was absolutely staying in the neighborhood, and that if he did not meet her, and agree at once to fulfil his promise of marrying her, that she would go straight to his mother and tell the whole story ; and in this note also she named a certain spot in the park where she was awaiting him.

In a rage Gilmore went out to meet her, and found her in the thicket where he was later on in the afternoon found wounded. A most stormy interview took place between them ; Gilmore positively refusing to marry her, and angrily reproaching her for having followed him to his mother's house.

" I will go to her, then ! " she cried. " I will go this instant ! "

" And what good would that do ? " retorted Gilmore, scornfully. " If you went twenty times she would only order you to be turned out of the house. "

The maddened creature upon this produced a small revolver which she had kept hidden about her person, and swore she would shoot Gilmore unless he fulfilled his promise.

He laughed contemptuously, for he was brave by nature and thought she was only trying to frighten him. But a moment later she raised her weapon and fired, and after staggering for a second or two Gilmore fell wounded and bleeding at her feet.

He became almost immediately unconscious, and the terrified, horror-stricken woman believing that he was dead, turned and fled from the spot, with the curse of Cain burning on her miserable soul.

How she got back to her house in town she never knew. Her brain was frenzied, her whole being filled with unutterable horror and woe. She had slain, she thought, the man she loved with an intensity of passion that Gilmore had never understood ; and the same night Dr. Robertson, of St. George's Road, was called up to attend on a poor lady who had shot herself in one of the houses in the street, and who was supposed to be dying.

She lived through that night, her brain reeling, and her self-inflicted injuries bringing her very near to the release from her misery she constantly prayed for ; and two days

later, amid her throes of anguish, a dead child was born, and for some time afterwards she was totally unconscious.

It was during these weeks of madness that Dr. Robertson thought it his duty to write to Lord Gilmore. Scandal had already bound together the names of the young Lord and the dark-eyed Spanish woman he was known to constantly visit; and this letter reached Gilmore on his sick-bed, and shocked him so terribly that it considerably retarded his recovery.

We already know the rest of this sad story. Gilmore sent money to Dr. Robertson, and frequently corresponded with him regarding the state of his patient: and yet that wayward heart of his soon found a new attraction; soon saw in Nancy Loftus' lovely young face, a charm, a beauty, that he believed no other woman possessed for him.

Then came the time of his hasty marriage, and he wrote while abroad again to Dr. Robertson, asking him to tell Mrs. Ferrars of this event.

This news brought another attack of brain fever on the unhappy woman, who knew now that her shot had not been fatal; that her false lover still lived.

Gilmore had regularly sent money for her to Dr. Robertson, but he had never seen her nor corresponded with her since that almost fatal interview in the park at Wrothsley, until he met her by accident coming out of the doctor's house.

The great change in her appearance touched him, and his own troubles perhaps had made him more pitiful for hers. At all events he went to see her on the following day, and all the old devoted love revived in Alice Ferrars' heart. He said no word of reproach to her for having attempted to take his life, and even made a sort of apology for his marriage.

"My mother had been exceedingly rude to her on my account," he told Alice, "and I felt bound to protect her from insult."

"And what is she like, Gilmore?" asked Alice Ferrars, wistfully.

"She is a nice little girl," he answered, lightly; "but you must not call me Gilmore any more, Alice;" and then he told her the story of Gerard's claims, which she already partly knew.

"It is a shame! it is a shame!" she cried, in her im-

pulsive way. "You are the true lord ; the other has no rights?"

Strange, but these words from this ignorant, impassioned creature were pleasing to Gilmore's ears. He kissed her when he parted with her, and promised to see her the next time he was in town. And then, with absolute loathing in his heart, on the following day he turned his steps homeward, knowing that the sharpest humiliation of his life was now to be encountered.

He had not telegraphed to Nancy to tell her the time of his proposed arrival, and, as he drove through the park when he reached Wrothsley in the afternoon, a sight met his angered gaze which seemed to make his cup of bitterness overflow.

Emerging from one of the side paths he suddenly perceived Nancy, Gerard, Dossy, and Flossy, all walking together, hand-in-hand, in a row! The two little girls were on either side of Nancy, and each held her hand, and on the other side of Dossy was Gerard, whose hand was also linked in his young sister's. They did not at first notice the carriage approaching which contained Gilmore, and were all laughing and talking together very merrily.

"Drive on quicker," said Gilmore as he neared them, putting his head out the window and addressing the driver of the hired carriage he had picked up at the station ; and as the man obeyed him Nancy saw for the first time who was in the carriage, as she caught a glimpse of Gilmore's head.

She made a few steps hastily forward but Gilmore only sternly raised his hat slightly by way of salutation, when he met the little group, and a moment later he had passed them.

"Well, I must say that's a civil way of returning to the bosom of his family," said Gerard looking at Nancy.

"Perhaps he thought it would be awkward to stop," answered Nancy, with a sinking heart. "I think I had better turn. I must go and see if he wants anything."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WIDENING OF THE BREACH.

NANCY expected to find Gilmore in a towering passion when she reached his suite of rooms, and she certainly did so. His face was pale, his brows knitted, and his eyes full of indignation, and he received her with very scant courtesy.

"Well, I must say," he began, "you all seem to be on very friendly terms here! May I ask, Nancy, how long it is since you commenced to walk hand-in-hand with the hunchback?"

"I was not walking hand-in-hand with him, Hugh. Dossy had hold of his hand, that was all."

"Quite a pattern family group, it seemed to me," scoffed Gilmore, bitterly, "and he makes himself perfectly at home here, I suppose?"

"Your mother wishes him to be recognized, and of course—"

"Do they call him Lord Gilmore then?" interrupted Gilmore loudly and passionately, as Nancy hesitated a moment. "They have no right to do so; he has no right to take up the title until I lay it down, and his claims have been proved and recognized before a Committee of the House of Lords, and I'll soon let him know this, I can tell you."

"But Hugh—your mother ordered the servants to call him Lord Gilmore," said Nancy, half frightened by his violence.

"Then she had no right to do anything of the sort. She ought to have been the last one, I think," he added, darkly, "to be so eager to cast this insult upon me."

"She does not mean it in that way Hugh; indeed she does not," said Nancy very earnestly. "She thinks it just and right, you know, and she does so wish that you and—your brother should be on friendly terms."

"Friendly terms!" repeated Gilmore derisively; "do you think a man is likely to feel on friendly terms with another man who has stepped into his place, taken

his name, and made a fool of him in every sense? I hate him, that is the truth; hate him with my whole heart."

"Oh, Hugh!"

"And to come back and find my place filled up, my wife, siding with this stranger, and on the most familiar terms with him, is a little too much for the patience of anyone!"

"You are speaking unjustly," said Nancy with some anger; "you told me in your letter to be civil to him, and when you dine with people every day you cannot help talking to them."

"Then as he is now addressed as Lord Gilmore, may I ask what name you bear in the household?" inquired Gilmore with a sneer.

"They call me Mrs. Gifford—Lady Gilmore wished this to be so."

"You had no right to give up the name you have borne as my wife, until I gave you leave!" said Gilmore, more angrily still. In fact everything Nancy said seemed only to irritate him, and she finally left him alone to recover his temper.

His arrival placed her also in a most uncomfortable position to Gerard. She had dined with Gerard since she had received Gilmore's letter requesting her to be civil to him, and naturally had been on good terms with the brother of her husband, who, on his part, did everything he could to please her. But now she felt almost afraid to speak to Gerard, lest she should increase Gilmore's anger against him. Gilmore either was, or pretended he was, too unwell to dine anywhere but in his own sitting-room on the first evening, and Nancy naturally dined with him. But the next day even Gilmore saw that it was impossible for this state of things to continue, and that he must force himself to go through the humiliating ordeal of making the acquaintance of his brother. He did this with the utmost repugnance, but at last consented to go down at luncheon time with Nancy, and when they entered the small dining-room together they found Gerard already there.

"I must introduce you to each other," said Nancy, trying to act as peace-maker, as gracefully as she could, and making an effort to smile, though really her heart was sinking. "Gerard, this is my husband."

Then Gilmore (for we must yet call him so, though

from this day he refused to recognize the title) bowed his haughty head, and looked steadily at the brother who had supplanted him.

"I hope you are better. I am glad you have come down," said Gerard, hastily, and rather nervously, and held out his hand, which Gilmore just touched.

"I am very well," he said, coldly, and then he spoke a few words about the weather as indifferently as he could.

The position was in truth even more trying than he expected, and when luncheon was served he sat sullenly down at one side of the table, and motioned to Nancy to sit by his side.

"Oh, no," said Gerard, meaning it all in kindness, "Nancy must not sit there, she must sit at the head of the table; she always does."

"I prefer her to sit here," said Gilmore, coldly and repressively; and during the meal the conversation was most forced and strained. But towards its close, however, Gerard's spirits rose a little, for he always drank a great deal of wine.

"May I drive you out this afternoon, Nancy?" he said presently; "I can drive a bit, you know, however much my education has been neglected." And he gave a little uneasy laugh.

"I don't know," said Nancy, rather nervously; "I think I shall not be able to go," and she glanced at Gilmore, "for I am going to read to Lady Gilmore."

"Oh, I dare say my mother would spare you for an hour or two, and perhaps Hugh here will go with us too?" said Gerard.

An absolute scowl passed over Gilmore's brow but only for an instant.

"You are very good," he said, "but I shall be engaged all this afternoon, and I want my wife to write some letters for me."

Thus poor Gerard's well-meant efforts at conciliation were in vain, and when Gilmore rose and left the room immediately afterwards Gerard could not restrain his vexation to Nancy.

"I say, Nancy," he said, "this kind of thing will never do, you know; I am not going to be spoken to and treated in that manner at my own table, I can tell you."

"It's all so strange to Hugh, but it will soon wear off,"

answered Nancy, apologetically ; “you see he’s been master here so many years.”

“That’s all very fine, but when I’m ready to do so much, and give up so much—more than the lawyer fellow wanted me, I assure you—I think Master Hugh might keep a civil tongue in his head.”

“It will all come right by-and-bye,” said Nancy soothingly ; “the change is so great, we must bear with Hugh’s bad tempers a little bit.” And she held out her hand to Gerard, who stooped down and kissed it.

“I would bear with a great deal to please you,” he answered, and then he helped himself to another glass of wine, and Nancy left him still sitting at the table.

She found Gilmore, however, unreasonably angry, for after all, poor Gerard had done nothing really to offend him.

“I cannot bear it, that’s the truth,” cried Gilmore, when Nancy entered his room ; “vulgar, low-bred cad for him to dare to ask me to go out with him.”

“But Hugh, consider.”

“I have considered, but it’s too intolerable to me, and then the fellow’s assurance is so great.”

“It is not his blame ; you know how he was brought up,” said Nancy, gently.

“There ! taking his part as usual—how my mother could be so mad, so utterly mad !”

He was still going on in this strain, upbraiding Nancy one minute and abusing Gerard the next, when a card was brought to Nancy on which the name of her old friend, Lady Blenkinsop, was engraved.

“It is Lady Blenkinsop, Hugh, will you come and see her ?” said Nancy.

“Certainly not,” he answered, “I do not want to be condoled with more than I can help.”

“Well, I must go to her, then,” and for a moment Nancy hesitated ; the next she went up and laid her hand on her husband’s shoulder.

“Oh, dear Hugh,” she said, “I do wish you would try to feel all this less. I know how trying, how painful it is, but still——”

“I would not care if the fellow wasn’t so intolerable,” answered Gilmore, half-ashamed of himself. “I know it’s hard to abuse you, poor little woman,” he added, “but it puts me in a rage your seeming to like him.”

"I think he is good-natured and kind-hearted, that is all, and he, too, feels that it is so hard on you, but you won't meet him half-way, you know?"

"I don't want any of his pity. However, never mind, Nancy," went on Gilmore, more in his old manner, "I'll endeavor to meet him half-way as you call it, at dinner-time; and now you had better go to the military dame who awaits you."

"That's a good boy," said Nancy smiling, and with a little nod she left the room, and went to seek Lady Blenkinsop, whom she had not seen since she had stayed with her a few days when she was a girl, and when her ladyship had lectured her on the attentions of Sir John Oakes!

She was standing erect and imposing as ever as Nancy entered Lady Gilmore's boudoir, and looking out of one of the windows of the room was a gentleman, who turned round at Nancy's appearance, and fixed his gray eyes with some emotion on her lovely face.

"Well, my dear," said Lady Blenkinsop, going forward and taking Nancy in her strong arms, and kissing her on each cheek, "there have been great changes since we last met."

"Yes indeed!" said Nancy with a little blush and a smile.

"And I have brought an old friend with me to see you to-day," went on Lady Blenkinsop in her energetic way; "you remember my nephew, Godfrey Erne?"

"Oh yes, yes;" cried Nancy, and her blush deepened; "it seems so long since I saw you."

The gentleman at the window had by this time advanced to Nancy, and had taken her hand in silence. He was a good-looking man, this, of some thirty-three years; brown and soldier-like; and he had clear steely-gray eyes and a heavy brown moustache and brown hair.

"Godfrey has got his step, you know," continued Lady Blenkinsop, "and has come home on sick leave, as he has had jungle fever, though I tell him he doesn't look much like an invalid. It seems strange, Godfrey, doesn't it, to see her married?" she added, turning to her nephew.

"Strange indeed!" answered Major Erne, and there was some agitation in his voice.

He had been in love with Nancy, in fact; in love with

the pretty dark-eyed girl whom he had danced with so often, and suppressed so often too the tender words that would fain have trembled on his lips. But he was a poor man in those days, and knew he had no means to support a young wife, and he knew also that Nancy would have no fortune. Yet there had been times when Godfrey Erne had almost forgotten this ; when he had been nearly led away by Nancy's beauty and sweetness to tell her how dear she was to him ; but he had not actually done this. Then Nancy went to England with her mother, and thus they were parted, but her memory had never quite drifted away from his mind. The news of her marriage had been a sharp pain to him, for Major Erne had sometimes indulged in a foolish dream that when he got his promotion he would go to England, and ask Nancy to be his wife, forgetting that such a pretty girl was sure to find other admirers. It was, in fact, one of those unfinished love idylls which fall athwart the paths of men and women like the fleeting sunshine of an April day. Nancy had half-forgotten Godfrey Erne by this time, yet when she looked again on his handsome features, and met the gray eyes that always softened when they rested on her face, certain memories—whispered words that had once made her young heart beat fast—recurred to her mind, and with a charming blush and smile she alluded to their former friendship.

"Seeing you brings all the old days back to me," she said.

"Then you had forgotten them until you saw me again?" answered Major Erne also with a smile.

"Oh, no—but so many things have happened since then."

"Wonderful things, certainly," said Lady Blenkinsop, "what of this extraordinary story I hear, Nancy, that Lady Gilmore has brought forward another son?"

Then Nancy related the strange tale and Lady Blenkinsop listened with uplifted hands.

"Well, of all the astonishing things I ever listened to, I think this is the most wonderful. Then, you are not absolutely Lady Gilmore after all, Nancy?"

"No, only plain Mrs. Hugh Gifford," answered Nancy smiling.

"The Honorable Mrs. Hugh Gifford at all events,"

corrected Lady Blenkinsop. "And how does your husband bear it?"

"Not very well I'm afraid," said Nancy, casting down her eyes.

"It's immensely hard on him there is no doubt, and yet I can understand how Lady Gilmore's dangerous illness made her see this foolish action of her youth in its true light. And the other young man, what is he like, Nancy?"

"He's very good-natured and kind, but then of course he's not been accustomed to the position he now holds, and his manner worries Hugh, unfortunately."

"He'll have to learn to get over that," said Lady Blenkinsop in the philosophic manner we speak of the misfortunes of others. "And his fortune as a younger son of such a rich family is sure to be a large one. You have made a very good match after all, Nancy."

Nancy laughed and blushed a little, and then after a few more words Lady Blenkinsop rose and took her leave, but not without pressing Nancy to visit her at Greystone Lodge.

"And bring this new brother-in-law of yours with you, Nancy," she said; "The General, I am sure, will like to see him after he hears all this romantic story you have told us, and of course I shall expect to see your husband, too."

Nancy thanked her, and then half-shyly took leave of Major Erne, who was very quiet during the drive back to Greystone.

"Well, how do you think she is looking?" asked his aunt, after they had started on their way. "Do you think she is improved or gone off?"

"She used to be a pretty girl; she is a lovely woman now," answered Nancy's old lover, and then he folded his arms and sat thinking moodily enough of the happiness he had perhaps thrown away.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE QUARREL.

GILMORE—or perhaps it were well now to call him by his true name, Hugh Gifford—for he dropped the title from the hour that he sat in bitterness at the side of his brother's table, really intended to keep his half-promise to Nancy to treat Gerard with greater civility, and went down to dinner on the same day full of this good intention.

But unfortunately Gerard had been extremely annoyed by his manner during luncheon, and after Nancy left him sat on drinking a great deal more than was good for him. This naturally did not improve his temper, and he had by no means regained it by dinner-time. He therefore received Hugh somewhat sullenly, and the younger brother was speedily angered by a sort of aggressive tone in Gerard's replies to his efforts at conversation.

Nancy tried to make things more pleasant, but saw with consternation that Gerard went on drinking deeply, and evidently intended to assert his position. And the servants had no sooner left the room than he actually did this.

"I say, Mr. Hugh," he said, roughly enough, "you and me may as well come to a right understanding about things. Now I, for my part, am quite prepared to act justly and rightly, and I think that no one can deny that I have done so. But I am not prepared to be treated with incivility, and, moreover, I won't!"

"I don't follow your meaning," answered Hugh Gifford, coldly, while a scarlet flush rose to his pale face.

"Oh, never mind, don't talk about it now," said Nancy, imploringly.

"Yes, yes, I must, Nancy," retorted Gerard obstinately. "The truth is, I can't put up any longer with the airs this fellow chooses to give himself—treating me as if I was dirt under his feet, indeed! Now, I am determined to be

master in my own house, and I'll let everyone know it."

"Don't be so sure it is your own house yet," said Hugh scornfully.

"Oh, yes, but it is; and no one knows that better than you, or you wouldn't give it up without a fight, that we may be sure. You haven't a leg to stand on, and the lawyer fellows have told you the same thing."

"For my mother's sake——" began Hugh Gifford, who was pale with suppressed passion.

"That's all very fine, but people say you brought on our mother's second fit; and it looked very like it, certainly," went on the half-drunken young man.

Hugh Gifford sprang to his feet.

"Will you be silent?" he cried, the veins in his throat and forehead swelling with excitement.

"No, I won't be silent at your orders," retorted Gerard, now also rising. "I mean to hold my own. I am Lord Gilmore now, and the sooner you drop the title the better I think."

"I have no wish to retain it, soiled as it is!" said Hugh Gifford with bitter scorn.

"And what have I done to soil it, may I ask?" said Gerard, loudly and angrily. "Folks say it wasn't kept so clean in your hands, at all events, if the truth be told."

These words seemed absolutely to madden Hugh, and he forgot all prudence and courtesy alike.

"You hunchback fool!" he cried passionately; "say another word like that and I'll strike you to the ground!"

But he had scarcely spoken when, with a cry of defiance Gerard seized a wine-glass full of wine and flung it straight at Hugh's face. It struck his forehead and cut it, and with a curse Hugh at once sprang forward to attack Gerard, when Nancy, with an imploring cry, caught him by the arm.

"Hugh! Hugh! Don't! don't!" she cried, "just think for a moment—think of the scandal and shame—think of your mother."

But Hugh, blinded by rage, and partly by the blood which was now streaming down from the cut in his forehead, pushed her roughly aside, and in another moment would have closed with Gerard if Graham, the butler, had not rushed into the room, and running in front of Gerard, prevented Hugh from attacking him.

Graham, indeed, had seen the condition of Gerard

at dinner, and also the ill-feeling which was evidently between the brothers, and he had loitered near the room door after his duties were over, and hearing the raised voices had gone yet nearer, and only just arrived upon the scene in time.

"Oh, my lord, come away, please come away," he prayed, while he protected Gerard with his substantial person.

"He insulted me!" panted Gerard, who was white with passion.

And now again Nancy seized her husband by the arm.

"Hugh, dear Hugh, for my sake, do not quarrel any more!" she prayed. "Oh, do come away—he is not himself," she half-whispered; "he did not mean what he said."

But Hugh Gifford lifted his clenched hand and shook it threateningly at Gerard.

"You cur!" he cried, "you low-bred cur! You have struck me, and you shall bitterly rue this day." And then he allowed Nancy to lead him from the room, and when they reached their own apartments his fury and resentment knew no bounds.

He had in truth received a bad cut on his forehead from the broken wine-glass, so bad that as Nancy could not succeed in stopping the bleeding she was obliged to send for the country doctor nearest to them, and tried to make some excuse to account for the wound. But Hugh Gifford made none. He sat sullen and silent while the doctor extracted some particles of glass from the cut, and then plastered up his forehead, but after the doctor was gone he told Nancy his determination.

"I cannot go to-night, for it is too late to catch any train," he said, but I'll leave this cursed house early to-morrow morning, and I'll never set my foot in it again as long as that cur is here."

"But Hugh, he did not know what he was saying or doing—he had taken too much wine."

"He has said enough and done enough for me," answered Hugh Gifford sullenly, "and I'll never speak to him again on earth."

And in vain Nancy tried to shake this decision.

"But think of your mother, Hugh—think how ill she is——"

"Have I not thought!" he interrupted her passion-

ately. "But for her I should have fought this case in every law court in England; to spare her I have given it up, and this is the end."

"Then must I get ready to start with you in the morning?" asked Nancy, who saw his mood was too dark for her words to have the least avail.

He hesitated a moment or two.

"No," he said at length, "you had better stay on here with my mother until things are settled. But I shall leave first thing to-morrow morning; nothing shall induce me to stay another hour.

And he kept his word. Long, indeed, before Gerard had roused himself from his heavy, half-drunken slumber, the next day the younger brother had quitted Wrothsley, with rage and hatred in his heart. He kissed Nancy when he left her, and then, with his hat pulled low over his wounded brow, he was driven away from the stately house he had so lately deemed his own; and while he was travelling to town full of anger and gloom, Gerard was only just awakening, and had a very dim recollection indeed of what had occurred on the previous night.

"That fellow gave himself some confounded airs, and we had a row," thought Gerard; but presently Graham appeared with some soda-water to appease his thirst, and the butler looked very grave.

"I had a bit of a shindy with that brother of mine last night, eh, Graham?" said Gerard after a prolonged drink of the sparkling water.

"Your lordship cut open Mr. Hugh's 'ead with a wine-glass, I am sorry to say," replied the butler with just a shade of reproach in his voice.

"Oh! did I? Didn't hurt him much, I dare say?" asked Gerard in some alarm.

"We had to send for Dr. Roberts to stop the bleedin', my lord; he bled very bad, and the doctor took out three pieces of glass from the wound, and then plastered it up; he said it was a bad cut."

"Oh! hang it; I'm sorry for that—awfully sorry. The truth is, I'd taken a little too much champagne, I'm afraid, Graham."

"Perhaps your lordship was a little on—champagne's a very deceiving drink."

"But I'm sorry if I really hurt him. I must go and tell him so."

"Mr. Hugh left the Castle, my lord, in the eight-thirty train. He's gone to town."

Gerard's face instantly fell.

"Left?" he said. "And the little woman—his wife—she's not left too, I hope?"

"No, my lord; Mrs. Gifford is remaining on for the present. She is with her ladyship now."

In very crestfallen mood, therefore, did Gerard make his appearance at luncheon time, and when he saw Nancy he was half-ashamed to look in her face.

"I say, Nancy, I'm so awfully sorry about all this," he began; "the truth is I was screwed, for Hugh annoyed me so at lunch I sat on drinking, and I suppose that made me bad tempered; and he's really too insulting, you know."

"It was a great, great pity, Gerard," said Nancy, very sadly. "Hugh left this morning and said he never would return."

"That's all bosh; he'll be back soon enough I daresay, and to tell you the truth I think we were much more comfortable without him; all the same I am sorry that confounded wine-glass cut him, and when you write you had better tell him so."

"Very well, I shall tell him," answered Nancy quietly. She knew, indeed, that though Gerard was very much to blame, that Hugh had undoubtedly been rude and aggravating in his manner to him; and she knew also that the brothers were very much better apart.

Gerard was very subdued and quiet all day, and was, in truth, thoroughly ashamed for his conduct before Nancy, of whom he was really fond. And Nancy, who was very good-natured, soon felt sorry for him, and a day later, when Gerard humbly asked her if he might drive her out in Lady Gilmore's pony carriage, Nancy told him of Lady Blenkinsop's invitation to them both.

"She said we were to go in time for lunch. Shall we go to-day, Gerard?" Nancy suggested.

Gerard was delighted at the idea, and soon Lady Gilmore's pretty carriage and beautiful ponies were ready for Nancy's use. It was a fine sunshiny day, and the country looked beautiful, and the long drive did not seem at all too long to Nancy, who really enjoyed it. They reached Greystone Lodge just in time for lunch, and were warmly welcomed by both the General and Lady Blenkinsop.

"This is my brother-in-law, Lord Gilmore," said Nancy, after a moment's hesitation, and the General immediately offered his hand to Gerard.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance," he said. "I trust your mother is keeping fairly well?"

"She is better, I hope," answered Gerard, rather nervously in his rough voice, and as he did so Lady Blenkinsop fixed her keen eyes upon his face.

But on the whole Gerard made rather a favorable impression on the party. And after luncheon was over he went out with the General and Major Erne to inspect the General's horses, and Lady Blenkinsop and Nancy had thus the opportunity of a little private chat.

"Poor fellow!" said Lady Blenkinsop, alluding to Gerard. "I think he has really been very badly treated, and we ought to make every allowance for him. He has a good face, too, and I'm glad you brought him here, Nancy."

"I am sure he has a great many good qualities, only his manner unfortunately is not good."

"How could you expect it to be good, brought up in a country village as he has been? But there is no doubt, I suppose, that he is the late Lord Gilmore's eldest son?"

"I think there is no doubt; my husband has resigned the title, you know."

"And Lady Gilmore? How do you get on with her?"

"Oh, so well; I read to her every day, and she is so kind; I like her very much, and then I pity her so much too."

"Well, I did very well for you, Nancy, after all, then?" said Lady Blenkinsop, with much self-satisfaction. "I was angry at the time, you know, when you had that quarrel with Lady Gilmore, but you see it has all come right in the end."

"Yes," said Nancy; and a moment later she breathed a little sigh which Lady Blenkinsop's quick ears heard.

"You know, my dear," she continued, as if almost in reply to it, "that no woman must expect to find her husband perfect. There are flaws in the best characters, but if you are wise you will seem blind to them, and you must not also expect the devotion of a lover from a husband of six months."

"I suppose not," said Nancy with rather an uneasy laugh,

Much more good advice did Lady Blenkinsop bestow on her young friend, for it was her nature to advise and guide. Then presently the three gentlemen returned from the stables, and Gerard by this time had got on such friendly terms with them that he had invited them over to Wrothsley to dine and stay all night.

The General, however, did not accept this invitation, but Major Erne did.

"Lord Gilmore has asked me to go to Wrothsley to-morrow," he said, addressing Nancy, with the grave courtesy which distinguished his manner, "do you second the invitation?" he added with a smile.

"Oh! yes, of course," answered Nancy, blushing and smiling; "but it's not my house, you know—I am only staying with Lady Gilmore."

"Nancy has to ask whoever she likes into it," said Gerard, heartily; "and as Major Erne is an old friend of hers, I shall only be too glad to see him."

For a moment Nancy looked at Erne's face as Gerard said this, and she noticed he had grown a little pale.

"You are very kind," he said, quietly, "and I shall be very pleased to accept your invitation."

Thus it was settled, and they parted with the understanding that Major Erne was to go to Wrothsley the next day and stay all night.

"And as many nights as you please," cried Gerard from the pony carriage hospitably; "Nancy here, I am sure, will be glad to see you, and so will I, and there are no end of swell pictures and other things to see about the place, aren't there, Nancy?"

The General and his wife exchanged a smile as the carriage drove away.

"Lady Gilmore must be a very foolish woman," said the General the next moment: "she has done that young man an injustice she can never undo."

"He seems very good-natured," answered Lady Blenkinsop.

"But very unfitted to be Lord Gilmore; however, God-frey," he added, turning to his nephew with a smile; "it's quite true what he says, that there are no end of swell pictures at Wrothsley; you must get your pretty old sweetheart Mrs. Gifford to show you them."

And thus it came to pass that the morning after Major Erne's arrival at Wrothsley, Nancy found herself wander-

ing amid the big unused state apartments, pointing out famous works by the great masters, to the grave-faced man by her side. It was a strange position, and naturally they both thought of the days which were gone by, when they had walked, too, side by side, when such different hopes and feelings filled their hearts.

Nancy grew very sad, for she began talking of her father, as Major Erne had actually been present when he met his tragic death.

"I shall never forget that dreadful time," she said; "there seemed like a black cloud always over the house."

"Yet for you it had a silver lining?" said Erne, looking intently at her lovely face.

"No; nothing could make up for my father's death," answered Nancy, quickly; "it almost broke my mother's heart, and she will never be the same woman any more."

"We all felt most acutely for her—nearly the whole regiment wore mourning, I think—and, but perhaps I should not tell you this now; but I wrote twice to you in those sad days to try to express my sorrow and deep sympathy."

"Then I never got either letter! I—I wondered you had not written. I thought you would."

"You never got the letters because they were never sent. I wrote them, and burnt them, for I could not express in them what I felt."

A burning blush rose to Nancy's cheeks at these words.

"We are forgetting the pictures," she said the next moment, a little nervously. "Look, this one is considered very fine; it is by Teniers."

They began therefore to talk of the pictures, and presently Nancy took Major Erne across the entrance hall to show him another of the great rooms, and as they were in the very act of crossing it a little old bent woman, with a shrewd, sharp, wrinkled face, was being admitted into the hall by one of the footmen.

This was Miss Gifford, of Gateford Manor House, the sister of the first lord, and grand-aunt to the present family, and she had arrived at Wrothsley on purpose to see the new grand-nephew and niece that she had heard so much scandal and gossip about.

She therefore hobbled up to Nancy, tapping her silver-headed ebony stick on the marble floor of the hall, and without any ceremony addressed her.

"So, you'll be the young lady, I suppose," she said, grinning out her yellow false teeth, "who was too sharp for my lady? Are you Gilmore's wife, or whatever he is called now?"

"I am Hugh Gifford's wife," answered Nancy, smiling, who instantly understood that this would be the eccentric grand-aunt she had heard the children talk of.

"Oh, that's it, is it—and is this the other son?" she asked, pointing with her ebon-stick at Major Erne.

"No, this is a friend of ours from India, but Gerard is in the house somewhere, if you would like to see him?"

"I should like; they tell me he is a hunchback, and the babe my lady now declares did not die when she said it did was a hunchback too. I remember it well—a little, crook-backed, sickly, squalling brat, and I for one was thankful when I heard it was gone, but no one was so thankful as its father. But if this youngster whom my lady has brought forward is actually the same child, I shall know him in a moment. There is no mistaking a Gifford; it's 'like father, like son' with them all."

"Well, if you'll come into the morning-room, I'll send for Gerard," said Nancy.

"All right, lead the way, and I'll follow you. I'm always half lost in this great house that my brother, poor man, built in his folly; but the Giffords are all self-willed."

"You will excuse me for the present, Mrs. Gifford," said Major Erne, smiling.

Nancy gave a little nod, and smiled also, and then after sending a message to Gerard, she led the way to the morning-room, followed by Miss Gifford.

"And your husband is here, too, I suppose?" said the ancient dame, peering curiously at her face.

"No, Hugh is in town; he went a few days ago."

"And why did you not go with him? Take my advice, young woman, never trust a Gifford out of your sight, for they're a wild lot—root and branch, a wild, unstable lot."

CHAPTER XXXI.

GATEFORD MANOR HOUSE.

BEFORE Nancy could make any reply to Miss Gifford's sweeping condemnation of the morals of her husband's family, Gerard opened the room door and walked in.

"One of those footmen fellows told me you wanted me, Nancy," he said, "so I came at once."

"This is Miss Gifford, Gerard, and she wished to see you," answered Nancy.

Gerard made a somewhat awkward bow to the old lady, who was looking at him keenly with her bleared, though still shrewd eyes.

"Come here young gentleman, and let me have a look at you nearer," she said in her shrill, sharp voice; and as Gerard approached her, a sort of cry escaped her twitching lips.

"Why it's your father's face!—aye, aye, no doubt whose son you are—Gilmore's son, his eldest son, and all these years your mother has robbed you of your birth-right."

"But that's all right now," said Nancy soothingly.

"How can it be all right?" asked the ancient dame, turning round on her sharply; "can the woman lying upstairs undo her sin and folly, d'ye think? Can she give this young man now what she has kept back from him—the rearing, and good-breeding which ought to have been his? She always was a fool, and why Gilmore married her with her sallow skin and ugly face, I never could conceive, and so fond of handsome women as he was too!"

"I have inherited that good quality at all events," said Gerard with an uneasy little laugh, for this old woman, with her weird face and bitter tongue, half frightened him.

Miss Gifford nodded her head twice.

"No doubt, no doubt," she said; "all the Giffords

make fools of themselves about women, and no doubt you will too—it's in the blood."

"I hope Gerard and my husband will be exceptions to the rule, then," said Nancy smiling.

"Hum!" said Miss Gifford; and it was an unbelieving utterance; and she looked at Nancy now, and nodded her head again, as much as to express very strong doubts on the subject.

"And how does he bear it—Hugh Gifford?" she asked the next moment, and both Gerard and Nancy cast down their eyes at this direct question.

"Not very well, I suppose," went on the shrewd old woman; "you've cost him a pretty penny, my young lady, for if he'd not married you, but someone that his mother thought good enough for him, she would have carried her secret to her grave. It was the blow to her pride and folly that did it, and I must say she has made Hugh Gifford pay full heavily for his liking for a good-looking face."

"My mother could not object to Nancy! what objection could she make?" said Gerard quickly.

"Hum!" again said Miss Gifford doubtfully, and she looked from one to the other of the two young people before her. "Shall I tell you, young man, what her objections were? She wanted her son—her handsome son—of whom she made an idol and a fool, to marry some girl who came of high rank and long descent, for the devil himself does not equal her in pride! But, luckily for you, Master Hugh had the family failing, and could not resist making love to a pretty face when he was near it."

Both Nancy and Gerard laughed at this, and the old lady also indulged in a grim chuckle.

"And you will be getting married too, soon I suppose?" she went on, fixing her eyes on Gerard, who blushed beneath that searching gaze. "My lady had you reared on the sea-coast somewhere, had she not, so are we to expect a yellow-haired mermaid, casting up to share the family honors?"

Once more Gerard laughed, but both Miss Gifford and Nancy noticed he did not seem at ease.

"I never saw a mermaid, unfortunately," he answered.

"But may be you've seen a pretty fisher-lass?" went on the ruthless old woman, and a scarlet flush passed over Gerard's face as he listened to these words.

"Come, don't be too hard on me, Miss Gifford," he

said the next moment, trying to speak carelessly. "Nancy, cannot you persuade Miss Gifford to stay to lunch? Its close on the time now."

"I hope you will stay," said Nancy, looking at their quaint visitor.

"I don't mind if I do," she answered, and during the meal which followed she amused them all with her sarcastic comments on people and things; and, as Major Erne was present, she happily made no more cutting personal remarks, and indeed seemed quite to enjoy herself, frequently addressing Erne, and showing indeed that she was a woman of keen observation. And before she left, she actually invited them all to have luncheon with her the next day.

"I'm an old woman, you know," she said, looking at Erne, "and things are changed since I was young. I get my dinner in the middle of the day, and go to bed at nine, when I suppose you are just sitting down to yours; but, all the same, I like to have young people around me occasionally, and I shall be pleased if you will come over to Gateford to see me?"

"You are very good," answered Erne, "but I am going to leave here to-morrow."

"No, you're not," said Gerard, hospitably; "we like to have you here, don't we, Nancy, and we're going to make you stay."

"You see you must stay," smiled Nancy.

"Well, then, Miss Gifford, I shall be delighted to accept your invitation," said Erne, and the old lady looked well pleased.

"You remind me of someone I knew when I was young," she said, and fixed her bleared eyes on the good-looking soldier's face; "aye, aye, years pass on!"

That many years had passed on over Miss Gifford's head, there was no doubt. She admitted being over eighty, but always declined to tell the exact day of her birth.

"What business is it of other people, when you were born," she used to answer tartly, if any questions were made on the subject. "It's enough, isn't it, that they should know when you die, and if you've anything to leave, they are always glad enough to hear of that little event; I hate idle curiosity."

But perhaps some recollection of her youth had made

her more amiable, this day at Wrothsley, for she was certainly more agreeable than usual, and told both Gerard and Nancy that she liked them better than she had expected to do. Gerard, on the contrary, after she was gone, declared she was the most dreadful old woman he had ever encountered.

"She's an awful old witch, Nancy, that's the truth," he said; "I really felt frightened of her, she looked as if she saw through one."

Both Erne and Nancy laughed aloud at this.

"My dear Gerard," said Nancy, "do speak with respect of her, I implore you; she's most awfully rich, and the family ought therefore to pay her every respect!"

"I don't care for her money a bit, I'm sure," answered Gerard laughing too; "But Erne there is the man who'll get it, my belief is! I saw her casting her ancient eyes at him most lovingly."

"My dear fellow don't raise my hopes," said Erne; "fancy a penniless soldier coming in for such a piece of good luck as an ancient lady to become tender on him! There is no such happiness for me."

Nevertheless, this little joke about Miss Gifford admiring Erne seemed to have the effect of making them all very merry, and Gerard again and again referred to it. Lady Gilmore also looked pleased when she heard of the invitation to Gateford Manor House, and the next morning they started in very good spirits to return the old lady's visit.

It was a long drive, but the day was beautiful, and Erne had some difficulty in keeping those steely-gray eyes of his off Nancy's charming face. Never had he seen her look so lovely, he thought, and once, unconsciously he sighed, upon which Gerard immediately declared that the near prospect of again beholding Miss Gifford had caused this display of hidden emotion, and Erne blushed through his brown skin at the careless, idle words.

At last they reached the old house with the ivy-covered walls and moss-grown gateway. Everything, indeed, at the Manor House was time-worn and gray, except the great elms around it, that had budded and leafed more than a hundred years, it was said, and were in their first freshness still. The butler who opened the door was past seventy, the youngest serving woman in the house over sixty, and the ancient dame who owned the place

looked more wrinkled, more weird than ever, as she stepped forward in the sunshine to welcome her young guests.

It was, indeed, a wonderful old-world spot, this : the furniture out of date, the silver on the table out of date, the old servitors, but Miss Gifford looked the oldest of them all, and was clad in garments she must have possessed fifty or sixty years. She addressed Gerard by his title, though he had yet no actual right to assume it, and she treated him in all respects as the head of his father's house.

"Your grandfather, my brother Thomas," she said, addressing him, "lived here before he built Wrothsley, and made his fortune here, too, I can tell you. He was a shrewd old man, and had his head screwed straight on his shoulders, except for one folly ; but his descendants seem to have inherited his folly, and not his sense."

"I don't know why you should always pitch into me so, Miss Gifford !" said Gerard with a laugh."

"Boy," she answered, looking at him earnestly, "when I said that I could have sworn you were your father ! Aye," she continued, "many and many a time Gilmore has sat where you are sitting now ; he used to ride over to see me, for they knew I was worth courting, you know."

"I am sure I shall never court you," said Gerard, bluntly.

She did not seem to resent this, but sat a few moments mumbling and muttering to herself. Her mind had evidently wandered back to days long gone-by, and she looked so weird and witch-like that a sort of chill fell on the hearts of the young people around her. But, presently she roused herself, and began telling Erne of riots she remembered when she was a girl, and how the soldiers had been called out to protect the factories, and how the officers had been quartered at some of the owners' houses.

"There was just such another as you are—with eyes like yours—lived at my father's over three weeks, and it seems like yesterday when I look at you."

So over this great bridge of time the old woman was looking back to the days of her youth ! Back, perhaps, to some dead romance, to some buried hopes. At all events, she seemed to take really quite a fancy to Major Erne, and showed him, after luncheon was over, some of her ancient treasures, and went hobbling along her narrow

garden walks, between the clipped yew hedges and the prim borders filled with old-fashioned flowers and herbs.

Then she took Nancy upstairs, and having unlocked a drawer, produced some really magnificent old lace.

"It's my marriage present to you," she said; "I go out nowhere now, so it's no use to me, or I should not have been so ready to part with it."

"But really I do not like to rob you of it, Miss Gifford," said Nancy modestly.

"I want neither false nor civil speeches, young lady," returned this terrible old woman; "there put up your lace and be glad you have got it, for there is none such to be bought now-a-days."

So Nancy accepted the lace, and presently Miss Gifford began opening other locked drawers, bringing out ancient jewel and ring cases, which she examined, and then mostly put them back into their places, with some muttered comment. And while she was engaged doing this, she suddenly turned sharply round and addressed Nancy.

"That young man downstairs—Erne, d'ye call him—is he rich or poor?"

"Very poor, I believe," answered Nancy, remembering certain half-whispered confidences of lack of means in the old days in India, which had fallen from Erne's lips.

"I thought as much," said Miss Gifford, nodding her head; "he's got a sad eye—the eye of a man who has known disappointment and care—well, well, they come to all, rich or poor."

By this time she had apparently selected two very ancient-looking ring cases, and carried these with her downstairs, in her yellow, claw-like hand.

The two young men were smoking cigarettes in the garden outside, but Miss Gifford speedily beckoned them inside; and when they entered the room, she opened one of the ring cases and hobbled up to Gerard.

"There," she said, "that's my present to you, for my brother Thomas, your grandfather, gave it to me on the day they made him a baronet, and it cost a mint of money, he said, for Thomas was always given to boast of what he paid for things. But they are good stones, so you needn't be ashamed to wear it."

It was a valuable old-fashioned diamond ring, and as Gerard was thanking her for it, she turned to Erne.

"And you, young gentleman," she said, "you must have something also to remind you of your visit to an old woman. I've picked out a diamond ring for you too, and if you don't like it, you can give it to your sweetheart."

"But unfortunately I have no sweetheart, Miss Gifford," answered Erne.

"Then you've had one, I warrant ye! Some loving lass's heart has beat the faster when she looked on your face."

For a moment as the old lady said these words, Erne looked at Nancy, and she was conscious that she blushed as she met his gray eyes.

"I have not been so happy as you think," said Erne, now looking down.

"Well, take the ring anyhow," went on Miss Gifford, "I used to wear it when I was young."

It was a magnificent ring, oval in shape, with a splendid diamond in the centre surrounded by smaller stones.

"No, really Miss Gifford, this is too beautiful, too valuable for me," said Erne, "if you will give me some small thing to remind me of this pleasant visit, I shall accept it, though, indeed, I shall need nothing to remind me."

"I neither give sham nor shabby things," she answered, "there, put it in your pocket or on your finger, and if you like to come to see me again, you're welcome."

Then Erne bent down his handsome head, and kissed her wrinkled hand.

"I shall always keep it," he said, in his graceful courteous way, "I shall always remember this pleasant visit to Gateford Manor House, and your great kindness."

Miss Gifford was not unmoved; her lips began to twitch, and she muttered something they could not hear. But suddenly she roused herself.

"It's getting late," she said, "and I want my afternoon nap, for elderly people require a great deal of sleep, and seeing you young folks has brought old days back to me—I feel a little tired."

Upon this hint, Gerard at once ordered the carriage, and the old lady stood at the window smiling and nodding at them until they drove away.

"Well, I will never forget that!" cried Gerard, the moment they were out of hearing. "Erne, allow me to congratulate you, when are you going to make the old witch happy?"

"I felt sorry for her, do you know," answered Erne, and there was a certain ring in his voice which Nancy heard, "I fancy I reminded her of someone she must have cared for in her youth."

"It's all very fine talking in that sentimental way," laughed Gerard, "she gave you an engagement ring, and Nancy and I are witnesses of it, and there's no escape, for you, my dear boy! In a short time you will be my great-uncle."

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

It must not be supposed that during this time Gerard had forgotten his "little girl by the sea," as poor May Sumners had called herself. He had in truth written to her several times, but as he told her it was impossible for him to leave Wrothsley just then, as for one thing he did not know when he would be called to town, regarding his taking up the title, and for another thing he was conscious that all his movements would now be regarded with jealous eyes.

Little by little it had dawned upon him that May was no fit mate for him, and that the strongest opposition would no doubt be offered to such a marriage by his mother. He was afraid in fact to move in the matter at all, until his own position was absolutely settled; and when his foster-mother, Mrs. Brewster, had once warningly and timidly approached the subject, he had treated it as a jest.

"It would never do you know, my dear," she said; "my lady would never forgive you."

"No," laughed Gerard, "it would never do; don't you trouble your head about it, dear old woman."

But though he spoke thus carelessly, he was certainly fond of his "little May," and often wished that her position had been more suitable to his own. In the meantime the poor girl was living on hope, and while Gerard was amusing himself as best he could in the present, she was thinking and planning always of the coming days.

And things went on thus for a few weeks, and Nancy

continued to live at Wrothsley, by her husband's wish, though he declined to go near the place.

"I shall run down and see you and my mother as soon as the coast is clear," he wrote to Nancy; "but I cannot endure the risk of again encountering the low-bred cad, whom I suppose I shall soon be compelled to call my brother. When things are settled we had better take a small house in town, but at present, as I do not know the exact amount of my future income, I think this would be unwise, especially as my mother appears to like to have you with her. The priest, I am told, is pushing on the cad's claims with great vigor, but from what I saw of him I fancy he will not be a very obedient son of the Catholic Church. Sometimes I cannot help thinking it's all a dream yet, but every one knows about it now, and the lawyers tell me that before the season is over, the new Lord Gilmore will be permitted to take his seat among his peers! Fancy that fellow—truly my mother has a good deal to answer for," and so on.

But though Hugh Gifford wrote thus bitterly, his words were gentle in comparison to his thoughts. After he returned to town, the cut on his forehead which had been inflicted by Gerard, gave him considerable pain, and even when it healed it left an ugly mark, which was an eyesore ever rankling in his soul.

He kept his promise and went to see Alice Ferrars very shortly after his arrival, and her passionate indignation against Gerard, her eager and unreasonable partisanship of his own claims, pleased him more than what he considered Nancy's lukewarm sympathy. This woman loved him better than the other, he told himself, though that other had cost him so dear. It irritated him also, to hear of the visit to Gateford Manor House; to know that Nancy was on friendly terms with the man who had injured him so terribly, and he forgot that he absolutely threw her into this intimacy, by leaving her at his mother's house.

And when he told Alice who had disfigured his handsome brow, this excitable loving creature gave a cry of horror.

"The wretch! the wretch! he deserves to die," she exclaimed.

"I wish he was dead," answered Hugh Gifford, gloomily. And the woman to whom he spoke these words, gazed

at him with a new light in her great and beautiful dark eyes.

"In my country," she said after a moment's pause, with a certain intensity of expression that reminded him of the days of her lovely girlhood, when he had wooed her beneath the orange groves, in the shining moonlight of her native land, and when she had oftentimes whispered she would give her life for his, in these impassioned hours; "in my country," she repeated, "there is such a thing as vengeance! The Spaniard kills the man who has wronged him; they two cannot breathe the same air."

"I wish I were in Spain then," said Gifford darkly, "for I hate him."

"Gilmore, he may die," said Alice rising and laying her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't call me Gilmore," he answered almost roughly; "now, when I know who will soon bear that name—who will soon disgrace it."

"He may not disgrace it long," said the dark-eyed woman significantly.

Hugh Gifford made no reply; he sat there silent and sullen, broodings over his wrongs, and a dark and horrible temptation at this moment entered his mind. Yes, this low-bred cur who had struck him, might die—might die a swift and secret death, and no one need know who dealt the blow. Grim stories of murders, and bloody deeds, witnessed only by the black clouds of night, or the turbid waters of some lonesome stream, crowded across his brain, and seemed to point the way to rid him of his foe. He left Alice Ferrars' house abruptly, but the woman, with the warm Southern blood in her veins, saw that her words had not fallen to the ground.

"He will come back to me!" she cried passionately, and aloud, after he was gone; "he will come back to me for help; the cold English girl he has married would not risk her life for his—but I will, a thousand, thousand times—I will die for him, if he will but love me again!"

And, during the days that followed, the haunting fiend that had whispered the black suggestion in the ears of the sullen, angry man, dogged his footsteps with a strange persistency. Hugh Gifford found himself reading the records of hidden crimes, dwelling on foul details, of how unsuspecting victims were trapped to their deaths, and

lured by false smiles and wiles to their secret dooms. All his nature grew changed, and he who had carried himself so gayly and carelessly in the world, grew gloomy, taciturn and reserved.

The men at his clubs laughed, and said Gilmore bore his come-down badly, and it crept out that the elder brother, had cut his forehead with a wine-glass, and that there was ill-blood between them. Only the stricken mother lying at Wrothsley did not know this, for both Nancy and Gerard, had done all they could to keep it from her ears. If Lady Gilmore inquired for "Hugh," Nancy always had some ready excuse. There was so much to arrange, she said; Hugh was coming down to see them shortly.

And so time passed on, until the day came when Gerard and his once reputed mother, Mrs. Brewster, were summoned to town, to give evidence before the Lords' Committee. Lady Gilmore's deposition was again read over before her, in the presence of two magistrates, and Mr. Stafford, and was signed by her cramped fingers; the doctors' giving evidence as to the state of her health, and also of the perfect sanity of her mind. There was great, though suppressed excitement at Wrothsley during these days, and Nancy's heart was often full of anxiety; and when Gerard and Mrs. Brewster left the Castle, and started for town, accompanied by Father Hayward, it was known that the crisis was near.

It came and passed, after some little delay; after a most searching and most exhaustive inquiry, the Lords' Committee decided in favor of Gerard's claims, considering it satisfactorily proved that Gerard was the late Lord Gilmore's eldest and legitimate son, and that he was therefore justly entitled to bear his father's title, inherit his property, and take his seat as a peer of the realm, in the House of Lords.

Both Hugh Gifford and the new Lord Gilmore telegraphed the news to Nancy, and with a strange fluttering at her heart, a feeling half of disappointment, half of relief, that it was now settled, Nancy carried the tidings to the stricken woman whose folly had caused it all.

Lady Gilmore listened in silence, but her lips quivered, and presently tears gathered in her sunken dark eyes, and rolled heavily down her cheeks.

"Poor—Hugh—" she murmured after a little pause, and her thoughts were evidently full of the best loved one.

"We must all try to make it—up to him," she muttered presently in her inarticulate speech; "I—will leave him everything I have—and Miss Gifford——"

"Dear Lady Gilmore," said Nancy, kindly taking her hand, "we shall be all right, Hugh and I, after he gets a little used to his new position. Gerard—or I suppose I must call him Gilmore now," she added with a smile, "is so kind, so nice, that I expect we shall soon all be quite happy together. Only you must get well you know, and that will please Hugh so much, and Gerard too."

A wistful look stole into the poor sick lady's eyes, as they rested on Nancy's sweet face.

"You must be the bond between us—my daughter," she said presently, and from that hour Nancy took a daughter's place, and Lady Gilmore was never quite happy if she were long out of her sight.

And the same day Nancy wrote to her husband, and tried to tell him in tender words how much she sympathized with him, but how she hoped that the strange event that had happened, would not darken their future lives. She told him too, that she trusted he would now learn to like his brother, whose early career had been marred by no fault of his. But these gentle phrases, this endeavor to soften his anger, only increased the hatred in Hugh Gifford's heart to the man who had supplanted him. He flung Nancy's letter with a curse upon the floor after he had read it, and speedily found his way to the house where he was sure to find a warm echo to his own angry and passionate expressions.

And as Alice Ferrars listened; when she understood, that the inquiry into Gerard's claims was decided in his favor, and that he who now stood before her was no longer Lord Gilmore; no longer bore the name which had been as sweetest music in her young ears, she suddenly flung herself down on her knees before him, and passionately kissed his hand.

"What matter!" she cried in a voice broken with heartfelt emotion, "they may take your lands and your name, but you are the same—always the same to me! The dark clouds have gathered, my beloved, the storm is near, but they bring thee but nearer to my heart!"

"You are an exception to the general rule then, Alice," answered Hugh Gifford, half-bitterly, half-tenderly; "the dark clouds and the storm, as you poetically put it,

have already made a considerable difference in the way in which I am estimated by those around me."

"She made him some impassioned answer ; she flung at his feet all the deep sympathy, the burning indignation that his soul hungered for, and when he remembered the words his young wife had written, the excuses she had made for the brother who had so grievously wronged him, his heart hardened towards her, and the good that had once dwelt within him, was paled and overshadowed by a dark temptation.

And the new Lord Gilmore? The young man also suddenly assailed by many temptations ; flung with the knowledge of a school-boy unfettered into the great world, how was he about to stand the ordeal?

He had never been in town before, and the youth reared on the wild Northern Coast, reared so unfittingly for the position he was now called upon to hold, at first was dazzled and excited to such a degree, that Father Hayward, who tried to keep some control over him, entreated him (but vainly) at once to return to Wrothsley.

But no—Gerard, or as we must now call him, Gilmore—was determined to have his fling. He laughed good naturedly at the good father's advice and admonition ; and indeed made the priest plainly understand he would rather be left alone. He in truth wanted to be rid of his presence, and he sent Mrs. Brewster back to Wrothsley, and after awhile Father Hayward was also obliged for a time to return to his duties, and Gerard—the old name slips out still—was thus left free control for the present over his own actions.

And after a little while he wrote to May Sumners at Scarley ; wrote to tell her that he was now Lord Gilmore, and that he was anxious to see her, and would go down to the Northern Coast to meet her, but that this meeting must be a secret one, and that for the present all correspondence that took place between them must be secret too.

"Living out of the world, my dear May," he wrote to this simple country maiden, "you naturally do not understand how strong the prejudices of class are, and though I love you dearly, I dare not rush in the face of all the opposition and bother that would be poured down on my unfortunate head, were it known that I carried on

my acquaintance with you. We must be forced, therefore, my pretty sweetheart, for the present, to keep all our love-making to ourselves, and I wish particularly to see you, because I have got something to say to you ; something to ask you, to which I most earnestly hope you will give your consent.

“Now, if I were to make my appearance openly at Scarley, you know all the gossip and scandal that would immediately take place. So I cannot do this, but if you will meet me some night I will manage to keep the appointment without anyone but ourselves being the wiser. But mind, dear May, you must not say one word to the old man about this. If you did you would make it impossible for me to see you at all. What I have to say to you is a secret, and it must be kept a secret and told, too, in secret ! There— isn't that mysterious, little sweetheart ? But, all the same it is quite true, and the future rests with yourself. Any night, about ten o'clock, next week, I can meet you at our old trysting-place, by the big rock on the sands, if you will let me know what night you can be there. To name an earlier hour would just be to court observation ; by that time all ‘early to bed and early to rise’ good people will have retired to roost, and we shall have the sands and the sea to ourselves. Good-bye, pretty sweetheart, and be sure you write when you get this, to-morrow—Your loving and affectionate,

“GERARD.”

This letter threw the tender loving girl to whom it was addressed into a state of extreme agitation, uncertainty and distress. She was not blind enough not to see that the change in Gerard's state had changed his heart. When he had left her, he had declared that he despised distinctions in rank, and had declared, also, that they should not in the least influence him. Now he openly admitted they did, and this secret meeting, this secret to be told only in the darkness, what could it mean ?

Yet May had not strength of mind enough to resist her lover's request. Perhaps the change in Gerard's fortunes subtly influenced her also, for who can answer for the strange windings of the human heart ? At all events she agreed to meet Gerard on a certain night at their old tryst-place on the sands : agreed to deceive the father, who loved her dearly, and to steal out in the darkness

to listen to words, that Gerard plainly told her could not be spoken by the light of day.

And she went to keep her tryst in the shining moonlight, for as she passed down the still village, where her light footfall was the only sound, save from below the murmur of the sea, the moon which had been hidden by a dark bank of clouds, suddenly emerged, and fell on the girl's pale face, as she hurried on.

She looked up, drew the shawl wrapped round her head closer, and then with beating heart descended to the sands. By this time there was a shining track of light upon the sea, and the great rocks where the brown seaweed clung were all lit by the silver beams. And as May walked on, a shadow fell athwart her path; the shadow cast before by the gleaming moonlight of the lover who was impatiently awaiting her.

"May!"

"Gerard!" were the only words spoken as these two first met with clasped hands, and then Gerard drew the girl behind the shelter of a rock.

"We didn't count on all this moonlight, did we?" he whispered.

"No, it came out so suddenly," she answered in a low voice.

"To punish us for being so naughty as to meet at this time o'night, I suppose," said Gerard, with a little laugh.

"Well, May, my dear, let us come to business at once. I asked you to meet me here because I have something very particular to say to you."

"What is it, Gerard?"

"It is this, my little sweetheart: I am quite ready and willing to keep the promise I made to you before I left here, but only conditionally. I mean I am willing to marry you, May, if you will swear never to tell that we are married to a human soul, until I give you leave."

May was silent for a moment; then a few broken words escaped her quivering lips.

"Not to my father, even, Gerard?"

"Certainly not to your father; to no one, or it is impossible that we can be married."

"Oh, Gerard, don't be so hard!" prayed the girl.

"I must be, May," said Gerard, firmly; "If we marry we must marry in secret, and no one must know that we are married."

"But what will my father think?—I don't care for anyone else but the poor old man!"

"Well, my dear, you must choose between the poor old man, as you call him, and me! Now I am quite in earnest, May—if you love me well enough to make this sacrifice for me, I love you well enough to make a considerable sacrifice on my part. But only on these terms: no one must know we are married, no one must be told."

She pleaded again and again, that she might tell her father, but Gerard would not listen, and at last her head fell upon his breast.

"I cannot bear to part with you!" she cried in a voice broken with sobs. "But Gerard—if I trust you—you will keep your word—you will marry me?"

"I swear I will," he answered, and as he spoke, the moonlight suddenly faded, and a few minutes later the two parted in the darkness by the sullen moaning sea.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE OLD MAN'S CURSE.

A WEEK after this secret meeting by the sea, the inhabitants of Scarley were one morning astonished and startled to see John Sumners, the boat-builder, running bare-headed down the village, inquiring of everyone he met if they had seen anything of his girl.

John had risen as usual at six o'clock, and without rousing his daughter, as was his custom, had gone to the work-yard, only returning to the house at eight o'clock, when he expected his breakfast would be ready for him. May was a most attentive daughter, and it was rarely that the old man did not find everything prepared for his well-earned refreshment. But on this particular morning, when John Sumners entered the kitchen where he thought to find the meal spread and the fire burning brightly, to his great surprise, though not at first alarm, he saw the grate was black and cold, and that there were no preparations whatever for breakfast.

He at once supposed that May had overslept herself, and went upstairs and rapped at her bedroom door. But

there was no reply, and now, becoming really alarmed, he opened the bedroom door and looked in, only to find the room was empty.

John stood and stared around him like a man who could not believe the evidence of his own senses. The bed had not been slept in since it was made, and there were some signs of disorder and haste, but still nothing very remarkable in the appearance of the room. But May was not there, and with a sort of inarticulate cry, the old man ran out bare-headed into the village, and stopped everyone he met to inquire if they had seen her.

"Ha' ye seen aught o' my lass?" he asked with trembling lips, starting eyes and a sinking heart. But no one had seen her, and presently some of his gossips gathered around him, questioning him about May's disappearance, and offering him the rough, though kindly, sympathy of which he so greatly stood in need.

"When didst thou see her last, John?" asked one old weather-beaten crone.

"Last night at nine o'clock," he answered hoarsely; "we had our bit supper, and then, dear lass," and here his voice broke, "she kissed me and went to bed."

"Ha' she been in bed then?" asked the woman.

"No, it didn't look like it," John was forced to admit, and the gossips around shook their heads.

"Maybe she's off with the hump-backed chap they say is a grand lord now," said one rough fellow who had been listening, taking his pipe out of his mouth to make the suggestion.

But in a moment John Sumners turned upon him with a face white with rage.

"Thou foul-tongued villain! say that again and I'll knock thee to the ground!" he shouted, and the man quailed before his angry eyes.

"Nay, John, John, he meant no harm!" cried the women. "But where can the poor lass be?" they asked. "She surely canna' ha' fallen o'er the cliff, sleep-walking, like Bob Johnson's girl did twenty years ago?" said one. "Or gone dement and made away wi' hersel'?" suggested another. "That's more like it," calmly hinted a third.

A weird chorus indeed was now sung around John Sumners' dazed ears, and every old woman had something terrible to relate. One remembered a girl setting herself on fire, and rushing down madly to the sea, and

dying there in desperate pain. A second had a dismal tale of a poor lass murdered by a jealous lover, whose dead body was found the next morning hidden in a cave. John listened and looked from one to the other, with whitening lip and haggard eyes ; and then suddenly breaking loose from them he started off alone along the cliffs in search for his girl.

All that day he wandered, and all that night, taking no sleep, and the whole of the villagers were ready to help in his search. At last some of them went to the nearest railway station, but could get no reliable information there. Several women had left in the night train for the South, but if May Sumners had done so, no one seemed to have noticed her. And if she had gone she had taken nothing with her except the clothes she must have worn. Some of the women when John was out of the house, crept in and up to May's room, curious to find out what she had left behind. All her dresses were there they thought but one, and her last new hat and jacket had also disappeared.

It began to be whispered about, therefore, that May had run away, though no one dared exactly tell her father this ; and naturally enough also, Gerald Brewster's name began to be coupled with hers. They were known to have been sweethearts, and the great change in Gerard's fortunes was also known, and these rough people began to say that maybe May had preferred gilded shame to honest poverty, and that the old man was wasting his time vainly in seeking for her.

Some hint of this at last reached John's ears, and when he understood it, he lifted up his hand and cursed his daughter if it were true. And the same day he returned to his work a broken-hearted man and aged ; and when any one mentioned May to him he sternly bade them to be silent. He went on in this fashion nearly a month, and then suddenly he also disappeared from Scarley ; and when the villagers awoke up one morning they discovered John Sumners' house and workyard locked and closed, and found that the old man had gone away without a word.

He had gone away in silence to seek his daughter in London, having a sort of vague belief that if she had really run away with the young man he had known as Gerard Brewster, that he would most likely find her there,

And the next few days found him wandering about the crowded streets of the vast city, apparently without any knowledge to guide his movements.

But John Sumners was a shrewd man, and by dint of inquiries he soon learned the parts of the town that a rich young man would be most likely to frequent. The season was almost over by this time, and for some reason or other, John took it into his head to walk up and down Piccadilly, and sometimes went into the park, examining every carriage that passed him as he did so.

And at last his patience was rewarded. One afternoon he was proceeding on his usual route, when a hansom pulled up in Piccadilly, just a few paces before him, and a young man jumped out, and began ringing at a certain door. In a moment John Sumners recognized this young man, the peculiarity of his figure making him quite sure he was not mistaken. The door was opened by a man-servant before Sumners could reach it, and then the young man ran into the house, after calling to the cabman to wait for him.

There were one or two loiterers standing about and John Sumners at once addressed one of these.

"Can you tell me the name of that gentleman who went into that house?" he asked.

"Do you mean the man with the hump-back?" answered one of the idlers. "That's Lord Gilmore, and there's a wonderful story about the way he has succeeded to the title; they say his brother——"

But John had heard enough, and the next moment he rang the bell of the house door, which he had seen Lord Gilmore enter, and when it was opened he asked to see him.

"I want to see Lord Gilmore," he said.

The man-servant eyed his rough garments and general bearing superciliously.

"I don't think you can see his lordship," he answered.

"I *must* see him," said John positively; and the man was just considering what he should do, when the new Lord Gilmore himself came quickly down the stairs of the house, for he had in truth returned to his rooms for something he had forgotten, and a moment or two later he found himself face to face with the old man he remembered since his boyhood.

He gave a little start, and his face flushed deeply, but he recovered himself almost instantly.

"Mr. Sumners! can it really be you in town?" he said, and he held out his hand, but John Sumners did not take it.

"I want a word or two with you," he said roughly enough.

"To be sure," answered the new lord; "I am in a hurry, but come along upstairs, Mr. Sumners—one doesn't meet an old friend like you every day."

So John Sumners followed Lord Gilmore up to the luxuriously furnished bachelor apartments, which he preferred to inhabit when in town to the family mansion in Eaton Square. No one indeed ever went near the family mansion now, for Hugh Gifford also declined to stay there, and the house had been closed during the whole season.

"This is my den," said Gilmore, when they reached his rooms, for as Gerard had now formally assumed the title, we must in future give him the name he rightfully bore in the world, and drop the old familiar one.

"And how do you like London, Mr. Sumners?" he added, glancing rather uneasily at the rugged features of the old man before him.

"I neither came here for likes nor dislikes," answered John Sumners, in his deep voice, fixing his eyes sternly on the young man's changing face; "I came to look for my girl—Gerard Brewster," he went on, "for that's the name I've known ye by all yer life, whatever new fangled ones ye may call yerself by now. I've come to ask ye one question—do ye know aught of my girl?"

"I?" said Gilmore, but his eyes flickered and fell before the old man's steady blue ones. "How should I know anything of her? I hope nothing has happened to my old friend, May?"

"This has happened!" answered Sumners, loudly, striking his hand heavily on one of the inlaid tables near him. "The girl has disappeared—went out from her father's house in the night and the darkness, the Lord Himself only knows where to. Had you aught to do with this, Gerard Brewster? The folks down there say ye had, and if so, ye shall ha' to answer for any wrong ye have done the girl to me?"

"I have done her no wrong; I swear I have not," said Gilmore. "Why should May's disappearance be laid to my charge? I am very sorry you are in such trouble,

Mr. Sumners, and I most earnestly hope May is all right, and I've no doubt she is."

"How can ye ha' no doubt?" retorted Sumners, fiercely. "I tell ye the girl is gone, and if ye ha' no doubt she's right and well, it seems to me ye must ken where to find her. Where is my lass, Gerard Brewster? Tell me, or I shall strike ye dead!"

For a moment Gilmore's face paled, but the next he answered the old man's furious words quite calmly:

"This is really most extraordinary and unreasonable conduct, Mr. Sumners," he said, "you tell me your daughter has disappeared from her home, but why I should be connected with her disappearance is more than I can conceive."

"Smooth words won't put me off," said Sumners, sullenly; "ye and the girl were sweethearts, folks said, and maybe now when ye've got a grand name, ye thought she wasn't good enough to be yer wife, but only yer light-o'-love?"

"This is folly," said Gilmore, impatiently, but his face flushed.

"Folly it may be to ye, but life and death to me," retorted John Sumners, his brown face, too, flushing darkly with the strong emotion of his heart. "She was all I had—the motherless lass, that made the bit sunshine of my home. If ye have wronged her, my curse will follow ye, and ye'll come to a black and bloody end."

"Really, Mr. Sumners—"

"Aye, and d'ye think because ye now set up for a grand gentleman, and I am but a poor laboring common man, that I ha' na right to look after my child's gude name! Look here, Gerard Brewster—if ye ken where the lass is, and if ye wull wed her rightly, I'll swear I'll never come nigh ye both. Ye'll ha' no need to be ashamed o' yer wife's father, for I'll never set eyes on her again. And I've saved a bit money—a good bit—and it shall be all hers, and she shall want for naught. That's not an offer I'd make to many, but the poor lass liked ye, and it's a base, unmanly thing to do her wrong."

For a moment Gilmore hesitated as he listened to these words, but before he could speak, a rap came to the room door, and the next instant it opened and a young man's head appeared.

"Ah, Gilmore!" said this new-comer, "I saw your cab,

and they said you were in, so I thought I'd look you up—but I hope I am not in the way?" he added, as his eyes fell on John Sumners' rugged, weather-beaten face.

"Not in the least, answered Gilmore with alacrity and a feeling of relief. "Come in, Whitmore, and have a brandy and soda, and perhaps Mr. Sumners here will join us?"

But John Sumners shook his head.

"Will ye think over what I have said?" he asked, once more addressing Gilmore.

"Certainly, but I fear I can be of no use to you—I am sorry I have no information to give you," answered Gilmore, but again John noticed he did not look him in the face.

"I'll find out if thou hast, anyhow," he said gloomily, and then without another word John Sumners strode away with his heavy tread, and the two young men were alone.

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Whitmore, who was a good-looking impecunious young gentleman, who had a talent for discovering those whom fickle fortune favored, and had picked up Gilmore's acquaintance since he had come into the title, and his romantic story was known; "if it is not an impertinent question, may I ask who the marine-looking gentleman is who has just left?"

"He's an old fellow I used to know in the country," answered Gilmore, with an uneasy laugh. "All the same," he added, "when you come to us down the river you need not mention that you saw him here."

Mr. Whitmore nodded his head twice.

"I understand," he said; "paterfamilias, I suppose.

Again Gilmore gave that uneasy laugh, and presently the young men went out together, and as they got into the cab outside Whitmore had a word to whisper into Gilmore's ear.

"There is paterfamilias again," he said. "I say, my dear fellow, he's following us; you had best take care where you go."

And all that day John Sumners watched the house he had seen Gilmore enter and leave, and all the next, but he never saw him. At last he grew weary and rang the bell, and inquired for Lord Gilmore, but was told he was out of town.

"When did he go?" asked John, hoarsely. "Where has he gone?"

The man-servant belonging to the establishment replied civilly enough.

"His lordship left yesterday, but I cannot tell you where he went ; abroad, I suppose, most of 'em go abroad at this time of year."

Then John turned away, with a muttered curse on his lips.

"He knows where the poor lass is hidden away," he thought, savagely ; "may the Lord reward him according to his due."

He stayed a few days longer in town, and then, disheartened and weary, he went away, and returned to Scarley, as silently as he had left ; sternly refusing to make any explanation of his long absence.

"I went on my own business and no one has aught to do with it," he said ; and his neighbors understood that he had gone to seek his daughter, and that his search had been in vain.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MISS GIFFORD'S WARNING.

THE summer faded into autumn, and golden hues stole over the leaves of the great trees in Wrothsley Park, and the days grew shorter and shorter, and the air sharper and sharper, and in the fields the yellow stubble told of the garnered grain. A beautiful season this, full of a strange sweetness of its own, a ripe fulness, in which a touch of sadness mingles, as the breeze stirs the brown waving grasses, or whispers through the fading ferns.

A beautiful season—a beautiful day—and yet a young wife's heart was sad within her as she paced alone along the green glades of Wrothsley, or looked wistfully up at the bright blue sky. Not yet married a year, Nancy still knew that her husband's heart was changed to her, and that an abiding shadow had come between their lives.

Hugh Gifford was in Scotland, and yet he had not asked Nancy to accompany him there. He had been down to Wrothsley once or twice, as the summer waned, taking very good care to find out first that his elder brother was out of the way. In fact the brothers had never spoken to each other since the unfortunate quarrel when the elder

had flung the wine glass at the younger's face, and but for the sake of his mother, Hugh would not again have entered the house which so bitterly reminded him of the past.

The new Lord Gilmore also did not go much to Wrothsley now. He had bought a place down the Thames, and had a steam yacht, and entertained a good deal of somewhat dubious company, and drank a good deal also, it was said. He was, however, always most kind and friendly to Nancy, and seldom came to Wrothsley without bringing her some present or other, and he was also very good to his mother.

But Lady Gilmore, who was better now, and able to move a little about the house, saw only too plainly, that the folly of her youth had sown bitter enmity between her sons. They never spoke of this to her, and she never spoke of it, but it lay like a black cloud over her heart, ever darkly foreshadowing some coming ill.

Thus it was not a bright household in which Nancy spent the summer and autumn days. Lady Gilmore declined to receive any company, and Nancy's only acquaintances in the neighborhood were Lady Blenkinsop, and old Miss Gifford, at Gateford Manor House. Major Erne had now accepted an appointment for two years on General Sir Charles Blenkinsop's staff, and Nancy was always glad to meet her old friend when she went to visit Lady Blenkinsop. But for days and even weeks together she saw no one but Lady Gilmore, the children, and their governess, Miss Pennythorne. She used to walk out often with Miss Pennythorne, but this poor lady's sorrowful experiences of life made her but a sad companion to a young creature like Nancy, who was naturally of a lively and even joyous nature.

With languid steps, therefore, and an oppressed heart, Nancy was walking alone on this bright September day, thinking vaguely of many things, and sighing softly as she thought. It was so beautiful here beneath the avenue of great moss-grown trees, through which the sunlight glinted on the grass; so still that there was not a sound save a kind of rustling shudder, as the autumn breeze passed among the changing leaves, carrying one here and there to wither on the brake. But Nancy's mind was out of tune, and even the lovely woodland scene around her awoke no enthusiasm in her breast. It was a relief to

her, therefore, when she saw a slender, slightly drooping figure, which she thought she recognized, riding slowly up the avenue towards her, and a few minutes later she encountered Major Erne, who dismounted from his horse, and put his arm through the bridle to lead it when he met her.

"This is a beautiful day, is it not—a perfect day?" he said as he shook hands with her.

"Yes; but I am in such a bad humor I cannot enjoy it," answered Nancy, smiling.

"A bad humor! I never remember any bad humors in the old days?"

"That was because I was young and innocent; I didn't know the world so well then, Major Erne."

"And you are so old and world-worn now?" he said, smiling a little sadly.

"I feel old, indeed I do," answered Nancy, rather wistfully; "everything is so quiet here, you know, on account of Lady Gilmore's illness, and I suppose that is the reason I get into bad spirits—and bad tempered sometimes."

"And you are in a bad temper to-day?"

"I was, but I shall try to get out of it now."

"Well, shall I tell you why I have come to see you to-day?"

"Yes, if it needs any apology."

"I hope it needs no apology; but I am the bearer of a message from Miss Gifford, of Gateford Manor House.

Nancy gave a little laugh.

"Really I shall begin to think that Gerard—I beg his pardon, Lord Gilmore—was right, Major Erne, and that the ancient lady has taken quite a fancy to you."

"On the contrary, I think she has taken quite a fancy to you; indeed she told me she thought that you had more sense than most young people, which for her, you know, was an immense compliment."

"Yes, quite immense; well, what is her message?"

"She has got something to say to you——"

"Something disagreeable, of course!" interrupted Nancy, with a little shrug and a smile.

"She did not confide in me what it was; but I shall repeat her words: 'Will you go on your way back to Wrothsley,' she said, 'and tell that young woman there that I wish to see her as I have got something to say to her. And if you like to drive her over to-morrow or the

next day, to have luncheon here, I shall be glad to see you both, as you can have a smoke while I am having my little private chat with her.'"

"Quite a mysterious communication, I declare," said Nancy; but her face flushed a little, she was wondering if Miss Gifford had anything to tell her against Hugh.

"Then, will you let me drive you over?" asked Erne.

"I suppose I had better go," answered Nancy, "she is a strange old woman, isn't she?"

"Most strange; with a curious insight into the motives of the hearts of those around her, I think. I watched her closely to-day, and I saw she was planning something in her mind before she asked me to give you her message."

"But can you conveniently go to-morrow?"

"I can arrange to do so with the General, if to-morrow suits you better than the next day?"

"Oh, all days are alike to me," said Nancy, with a little impatient sigh; "I have no engagements."

"Let us fix the day after, then; do you know I fancy it is something for your benefit that Miss Gifford is planning."

"It is to be hoped so—but you will come into the house now, won't you?"

"I have delivered my message," said Erne, smiling, "and there is a dinner party at the General's to-day at which I am bound to appear, so if you will excuse me I shall now turn my horse's head homeward; but I shall re-appear on Thursday morning in time to escort you safely to Gateford Manor House, for luncheon, at half-past one o'clock."

"Well, I must not detain you if that is the case."

"Yet I would fain linger a little longer here in the sunlight! What wonderful coloring there is down that glade, look, Mrs. Gifford—the gold and mellow brown, and yon faint blue mist? Certainly Wrothsley is a beautiful place; a home any one might be proud of."

"Yet you see its owner is scarcely ever here."

"You mean the present Lord Gilmore? Well, he's a little bit odd, you know, and may not appreciate country life."

"Poor Gerard! I fancy he is at heart a very good fellow indeed, but his manner is so against him."

"Miss Gifford declared to-day—and I think so too—that he has a remarkably good opinion of himself; in

fact thinks himself dangerously attractive," said Erne, with a laugh.

"How can that be, though his face is certainly handsome?"

"Is he like—Mr. Gifford?" said Erne, with a sort of hesitation, for somehow to name Nancy's husband gave him a vague feeling of discomfort.

"Yes, really very like in features, though you could not offer a greater insult to each than to tell them so."

"It is strange," said Erne, musingly; he was wondering if there were any likeness between the characters of the two brothers also; one of those subtle family inheritances of which we find traces in natures seemingly so diverse.

But he talked no more of the Giffords; he shook hands with Nancy, and then rode thoughtfully away, thinking as he went that her face had grown sadder and thinner than it used to be.

"And she was such a bright girl—ah, well;" and Erne sighed, and wondered if Nancy had been *his* wife, if she would have looked so wistful and weary as she had done to-day.

And the message from the grim old lady at Gateford Manor House had not tended to raise Nancy's spirits. She kept wondering what it could mean, and Lady Gilmore also seemed to grow uneasy when she heard of it.

"Her speech always has a sting," she said, and her thoughts wandered back to the many hard words she had listened to from Miss Gifford's biting tongue. Nevertheless, she advised Nancy to accept her invitation; and accordingly at the time fixed, Nancy did start for Gateford Manor House, accompanied by Major Erne and two grooms.

It was a dark lowering day, the sky heavy with storm-clouds, while a fitful wind rose and fell at uncertain intervals. Altogether the weather looked so threatening that Erne advised Nancy to postpone her visit, or at all events to go in a close carriage. But Nancy preferred to risk it in Lady Gilmore's pony carriage, and so they started, and arrived at Miss Gifford's house without any misadventure.

"We won't get back without a wetting, I'm certain," said Erne, glancing up at the gloomy sky, as they reached the antique portals of the Manor House.

"We can make the day an excuse for not staying long," she answered in a low tone ; and Miss Gifford's first words were not reassuring.

"Well, I never expected you," she said, as she put out her claw-like hand in greeting ; "it was folly to come with a storm staring you in the face."

"Perhaps it won't come until we get back," answered Nancy.

"You'll have to make haste then," retorted the old lady, and then she led the way to the dining-room, pressing her guests to eat their lunch as quickly as possible.

Erne also was anxious to go soon, on account of Nancy, and Miss Gifford made no offer for them to remain until the threatening storm was over.

"Yes, we must not stay long," he said ; but Miss Gifford had something to say, and she meant to say it.

"Come with me upstairs," she presently proposed, looking at Nancy ; "and Major Erne must amuse himself with the claret and a cigar until we come back ;" and a sort of smile passed over her wrinkled visage as she glanced at Erne.

Then she hobbled up the old-fashioned staircase, followed by Nancy, and went into the yet more old-fashioned room, whose furnishing had not been changed for seventy years. It looked faded and drear enough now in the darkling light, and a sort of shudder passed over Nancy's frame as she looked around her.

Miss Gifford carefully shut the door behind her, and then approaching Nancy, peering into her face with her bleared, yet searching eyes.

"I told the young man downstairs to bring you here," she began, "because I have got something to say to you ; a warning to give you."

"A warning?" repeated Nancy in a faltering voice.

"Yes, a warning ; why is it you are not with your husband, instead of your mother-in-law?"

"Hugh—wishes me to remain with Lady Gilmore for the present—you see we have no house of our own yet," hesitated Nancy.

"But why have you no house?" went on Miss Gifford ; "the new lord has given Hugh Gifford a handsome income, I am told ; can he not afford to take a house for his wife out of it? He ought to be able to do so, and you are a fool if you do not insist on it."

Nancy was silent and cast down her eyes.

"I warn you," continued the ancient woman before her, stretching out one of her skinny hands, and shaking a bony finger as if to give impressiveness to her words, "Hugh Gifford is not a man to be left alone knocking about the world. There were enough scandals and stories about him before he married you, and take care there are not scandals and stories after—nay, I am told there are."

"Oh, do not talk thus to me, Miss Gifford," said Nancy, in much distress, "You see I always feel I did so much harm to Hugh by marrying him, that—that I do not like to give him any expense I can help, and as he wishes me to stay on at present with Lady Gilmore——"

"Your place is with him," interrupted Miss Gifford, positively, "and not with his mother. But the expense shall not hinder him from furnishing a decent house for you. This is why I sent for you to-day—ask him to take a house and I will give you fifteen hundred pounds to furnish it, and remember the furniture is yours not his."

"It is very good of you, most good—I should like a house of my own very much, but I have always thought of the expense."

"Then don't think about it any longer; I'll send you a check for the money to-morrow, and take my advice and go and look after your husband. There's not one of them to be trusted, and a Gifford least of all."

These words made Nancy very uneasy, and as she stood hesitating how to answer them, Miss Gifford pointed with her ebony-stick to the gathering clouds overhead.

"Best make haste home now as quick as you can," she said; "I have said my say, and if you are a wise woman you'll not forget my words. Now let us go downstairs and I'll ring and order your carriage round, for I am certain we shall have a storm."

Five minutes later the carriage drove round, and Nancy, with Miss Gifford's ominous warning ringing in her ears, was assisted into it by Erne, and before they had proceeded a mile on their way the long-threatening storm burst forth with extraordinary violence. A torrent of rain descended first—almost like a water-spout—and then immense hail-stones came pattering down around them, and suddenly a vivid flash of lightning darted across the sky.

"We have got it with a vengeance now," said Erne, as Nancy cowered down her head; "let me pull the hood of

your cloak over your hat, and I advise you to keep your eyes shut."

The servants behind drew out umbrellas and wraps; one of them holding an umbrella over Nancy; and Erne, who was a first-rate whip, urged the ponies on to their utmost speed. Dashing forward they went amid blinding flashes of lightning and deafening peals of thunder, while scarcely a word was spoken by the occupants of the pony carriage. Then suddenly there was a blaze, a shock, a roar as of a hundred cannons, and the ponies leaped wildly into the air, one of them falling backwards, struck dead, while the other struggled madly in the traces.

Erne's first thought was for Nancy. He turned to her still holding the reins firmly, and saw her head had fallen forward, and that the umbrella the groom had been holding over her was rent and torn into a thousand fragments.

"Get out, men; hold the horses' heads!" he cried to the grooms behind, but only one man obeyed him.

"Johnson's struck, sir," said this man. Johnson was the groom who had been holding the umbrella over Nancy, and Erne glancing round saw this man's face blackened and scorched, his eyes already fixed in a ghastly stare of death.

"Do not be afraid," said Erne, putting his arm round Nancy, for he perceived that it was now absolutely necessary that he should lift her out of the carriage, which was swaying violently as the groom tried to obtain command over the terrified pony; "I will lift you out, Nancy. Just put your hand on my shoulder; the worst is over now, that flash was not so near—come, try to take courage."

But no words came from Nancy's lips, no sound, and a pang, sharp and cruel as a sword-cut, darted through Erne's heart.

"Nancy! Why don't you speak?" he cried sharply, in sudden terror. "Nancy! What is the matter!"

But there was no answer; she lay in his grasp motionless, her head hanging forward, and swaying with the movement of the carriage, and Erne now saw that the hood of her cloak was burnt and shrivelled.

"Oh! my God!" he muttered between his set teeth; and then with a great effort of will, and he was a strong man, he contrived to scramble from the rocking carriage, still holding Nancy in his arms.

He laid her on the wet ground by the side of the road, and lifted up her head. Her face was changed and blackened; the consuming flame had touched her also with its fiery hand.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

GODFREY ERNE had much self-control; he had crushed back the feelings of his heart to Nancy in her bright girlhood, because he knew he had not the means to support a wife; and he crushed back the feelings of his heart now when he feared she lay stricken dead in his arms.

"Which is the nearest—Gateford or Wrothsley?" he called out hoarsely to the groom, who had now succeeded in getting partial command over the affrighted pony, and was endeavoring to release it from the traces.

"Gateford, by six or seven miles, sir," answered the groom.

"Then ride the pony there—you can manage to do that," said Erne, still in that hoarse, changed voice. "Tell Miss Gifford from me what has happened, and ask her to send a carriage at once here for Mrs. Gifford. Do not waste a moment; but first see after that poor fellow in the carriage."

The groom having now freed the living pony from the harness led it up to the back of the carriage, where the dead man still sat, though his head had fallen backward, and his half-open, sightless eyes seemed staring upwards at the darkling sky.

The groom put his hand on his wrist, looked at him, and shook his head.

"He's done for, sir," he said, "poor Johnson's dead—dead as a door nail."

"Then nothing can avail him, leave him where he is, and ride at once to Gateford and give my message, and I will remain here with Mrs. Gifford until you return with the carriage; and ask Miss Gifford for some brandy to bring back with you."

"I hope the poor lady——" hesitated the groom.

"I cannot tell," said Erne sharply and briefly in answer to the unspoken question, "go at once, do not delay a moment now."

The groom obeyed him immediately, and leaped on the back of the unsaddled pony, and started off at a gallop for Gateford Manor House, and Erne was left alone with Nancy and the dead man.

Again he looked into her face, and something like a groan broke from his firm lips as he pushed some burnt hair from her brow. Was she dead? he asked himself, even as he tried to screen her from the downpour of rain which was turning the road into a river and soaking everything they wore. He laid her head on his breast and wrapped her cloak more closely around her, and endeavored to shelter her with his own coat. The storm still went raging on, but Erne never heeded it. A storm was raging in his own breast, darker and more terrible than the thunder clouds. That she should be lying thus—lying in his arms dead, or perhaps dying—the girl he had loved so well, the woman whom but a day ago he had told himself he must not love, made him totally indifferent to the wild uproar of the elements.

Did something stir presently on his breast or was it the strong throbbings of his own heart? He moved back the cloak a little from her face and saw a faint quiver pass over it, and the next moment she feebly raised her hand and moved it uncertainly.

"Nancy, you are quite safe, said Erne with unconscious tenderness and relief in his voice; "I have sent one of the grooms for a carriage to Gateford, he will be here soon now, so you must not be afraid any more."

She half-lifted her head, and put her hand to her face, and a shiver, a shudder rather, ran through her frame.

"Are you cold?" asked Erne, drawing the cloak once more closely around her.

"Where—am I?" came feebly now from Nancy's parted lips.

"Here, with me, Nancy—with Godfrey Erne—and you will soon be at Gateford again."

She tried again to lift her head; and again put her hand to her face, and an expression of great fear stole over it.

"It is quite dark," she half-whispered; "so dark, I can see nothing."

Then Erne glanced upwards at the sky.

"No," he said; "it is clearing there over towards the west, the storm will soon be over now, and it is much lighter."

"I can see nothing, I can see nothing," moaned Nancy. "I—must be blind."

"The lightning, perhaps, has hurt your eyes," answered Erne with great gentleness and kindness; "but that will all come right; shut them now, and lean against me, and I will try to keep the rain away from you."

And Nancy's head once more fell down as if she had not strength to hold it up, and when Erne laid his hand upon her wrist to feel the pulsation, it was so feeble that every moment his alarm increased. He did not attempt to speak to her any more, nor rouse her from the half-unconscious state into which she seemed to have fallen. She moaned slightly once or twice but gave no other sign of life, and Erne's miserable anxiety to be able to procure her some assistance was terrible to endure.

Would the carriage never come? he asked himself with almost uncontrollable impatience. An hour and more had passed since he had sent the groom to Gateford, and Erne knew well that the fluttering breath that he listened for so eagerly at any moment might be stayed. At last his strained ears heard a distant sound of wheels, and a few minutes later Miss Gifford's old-fashioned family coach appeared, the coachman drawing up a few yards from where Erne stood, holding the half-unconscious Nancy in his arms.

Then one of the ancient serving-women from Gateford descended from the coach, and the groom Erne had sent; the woman giving a kind of suppressed cry when her eyes fell on the dead man and the dead horse.

"Hush," said Erne, sternly; "Mrs. Gifford must be kept perfectly quiet. I will lift her into the carriage, and then you take off her wet cloak and boots, and rub her feet and hands with brandy if you have brought any."

The old woman had brought brandy and strong essences, and by Erne's directions she first got back into the great roomy family coach, and then Erne carried Nancy in his arms to the carriage door, and she was lifted in partly by himself, and partly by the serving-woman.

The ancient handmaid luckily had all her senses about her, and soon wrapped Nancy's chill cold form in a warm dry fur cloak which she had brought, and drew off her wet boots. Erne, who had also got into the coach, still held Nancy in his arms, and now began wetting her lips with brandy and at last induced her to swallow a little of the spirit,

This seemed slightly to revive her, for she lifted up her head and stretched out her hands.

"Are you better now?" asked Erne gently.

"I—I feel so strange—and I cannot see," faltered Nancy's weak voice.

"That is the shock to your nerves, you know," explained Erne, with the deepest pity in his heart; "it will pass away; and you are safely in Miss Gifford's carriage now, and we shall drive quietly back to Gateford; and in a few days you will be quite well again, and the storm is almost gone now."

"Did the lightning strike me?" asked Nancy's scarcely audible tones.

"It struck the carriage, but you are quite safe now, and you must try to swallow a little more of this to keep you warm, and Miss Gifford's maid here will stay beside you while I give some orders."

He placed her on the seat of the carriage as he spoke, and bade the old woman support her in her arms. Then he went and gave some directions to the Wrothsley groom concerning the dead man and the dead pony, returning to Nancy's side a moment later, and holding her up all the way during their return to Gateford.

Miss Gifford was standing in the antique porch as they drew near the old house, anxiously waiting their arrival. Something that beat still in her withered breast had smote her when she realized that she had sent out a young girl, and the handsome soldier who reminded her of her youth, to bear the brunt of a terrible storm on the exposed highway, instead of beneath the shelter of her roof-tree. Then, when the groom on the unsaddled pony galloped up to the house door, and told of the disaster that had occurred—told with a white, drenched, scared face, that the lightning had killed one man, and that he feared Mrs. Gifford was dead also—the old woman who listened trembled and grew pale, remembering her own selfishness.

She always went to sleep every afternoon, and she wanted to sleep through the storm, and so had not cared to be troubled with visitors. Thus she had let them go away; indeed had given no hint about asking them to remain, and her heart reproached her with this now.

And with strange agitation and fear she watched him lift Nancy out of the carriage, assisted by her ancient maid, and caught a glimpse of the face that had been so lovely

but a few hours before. Erne made her a sign to suppress any exclamations of alarm, and Nancy was quickly and quietly carried to one of the bedrooms, and a doctor immediately sent for.

Miss Gifford then beckoned to Erne to come to her, and grasped his hand in her own shaking withered one when he did so.

"What is the matter with her!" she asked in a trembling voice.

"The lightning struck the carriage," he answered very gravely and sadly; "and killed one of the grooms and one of the ponies, and must have struck Mrs. Gifford also, for the hood she had over her head was burnt, and some of her hair—and the most terrible part is, I fear she is blind."

"Blind? Surely not blind?" echoed Miss Gifford, in great agitation.

"At least she can see nothing, and she is utterly prostrate with the shock."

"Poor young thing—poor young thing! But we must pull her through, and that husband of hers ought to be here."

"Yes," said Erne, casting down his eyes.

"I'll telegraph for him; this never would have happened if she had been with him as she ought to have been—he ought to be ashamed of himself!"

It was some relief to Miss Gifford to be able to abuse Hugh Gifford, and thus remove part of the blame of exposing Nancy to the storm off her own shoulders. And she did this at intervals during the rest of the day, though it must be admitted doing everything she could for poor Nancy. The doctor when he arrived pronounced her in a critical condition, and added that her husband should be sent for at once; but was unable to give any positive opinion as to her sight. For the present she was blind, and with a heavy heart during the evening, Erne borrowed a horse of Miss Gifford, and rode to Wrothsley to break the sad news to Lady Gilmore, before he returned to the General's at Greystone Lodge, where he was still staying.

A day later and Hugh Gifford arrived at Gateford Manor House, where Nancy still lay very ill. But he was not allowed to see his young wife for several days, during which time Miss Gifford took the opportunity of speaking her mind to him. She told him why she had sent

for Nancy, and Hugh Gifford listened with a moody brow and an angry heart.

"I meant to take a house for her in the spring," he said gloomily.

"She won't likely be alive to go into it," retorted Miss Gifford; "but if she is I'll see that you do take one; and, moreover I mean to furnish it, and settle the furniture on her."

But after a few anxious days Nancy rallied, but when they told her that her husband was in the house, she gave a little, anxious start.

"What will he say when he hears I am blind?" she said, in a low tone.

"You can't help being blind, even if you are," replied Miss Gifford, tartly. "If he had happened to be struck blind, I suppose you would have just felt the same to him?"

"But that is different," said Nancy, with a little sigh, a sigh that revealed much to Miss Gifford's ears.

But when Hugh Gifford was allowed to see Nancy, he was most kind and gentle to her. He was greatly shocked to see her so changed, and the idea of her blindness was intensely painful to him.

"I think I can see just a little now, Hugh," she said, pitiably, and he stooped down and kissed her brow and eyelids.

"Your pretty eyes will be all quite right soon," he said; "don't distress yourself about them, Nancy."

He sat down beside the bed and took her hand in his, and Nancy began to reproach herself for having ever thought him careless or unkind.

"If you don't mind," she said wistfully.

"Don't think I am quite such a selfish brute as that," he answered quickly; and then in a little while he sighed, and rose restlessly, and began to pace the room.

But on the whole Miss Gifford was satisfied with his manner to Nancy, and, when she began to recover from the stroke, he used to lead her down to the old-fashioned garden, and Miss Gifford would watch the two wandering there arm-in-arm, and had her head well pleased as she did so.

"He's not so bad," this strange old woman used to reflect; "if they have a son he shall be my heir—except legacies."

Godfrey Erne only called twice to inquire how Nancy was after Hugh Gifford arrived at Gateford Manor House, and then for the first time he saw the handsome, graceful man, who had once been Lord Gilmore.

"I do not know how to thank you enough, Major Erne," said Hugh Gifford courteously, "for all your kindness to my poor young wife in her great peril."

"I was only too glad to be of any assistance to her," he answered, briefly.

"You are an old friend of her family, she tells me?" continued Hugh Gifford, pleasantly.

"Yes, I knew both Colonel and Mrs. Loftus very intimately in India."

But he did not say how well he had known Nancy! Hugh Gifford thought his manner was rather abrupt, and smilingly told Nancy after their interview that he thought her Indian friend was very reserved.

"There is quite a military brevity about his style of conversation," he said; "and yet he's not a bad-looking fellow."

"No. Miss Gifford thinks he is quite handsome," answered Nancy, also smiling; "and then, Hugh, he is so kind—so very kind."

"He seems to have been very good to you, little woman, at any rate, though why you were so foolish as to start in a storm I cannot conceive."

"But it was not a storm when we started, Hugh."

He did not continue the conversation, and Nancy noticed how constantly he would thus abruptly end one, and how uncertain his spirits were. But he said no unkind word to her, and after remaining about a fortnight at Gateford, he took her back to Wrothsley and Miss Gifford kissed her before she went.

"There! good-bye," she said, as she laid her thin blue lips against Nancy's; "the last face I kissed was my dead brother's—your husband's grandfather—for I am not given to kissing and humbug; but, all the same, I am sorry you are going."

"Good-bye, dear Miss Gifford, and thank you for all your great kindness," said Nancy, sweetly and gratefully.

Again the stern old woman kissed her, and then shook hands with Hugh Gifford.

"Mind you are good to her," she said, by way of a parting salutation to her grand-nephew; and as she

watched Hugh hand his poor blind young wife into the carriage she began to mutter to herself.

"She's too good for him, anyhow," she said, "but, please God, she'll get back her sight, and please God, too, her son will have the old place after I'm gone."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A NEW HAPPINESS.

THE next few months brought great changes to Nancy. She continued very weak and delicate all through the early winter, for her constitution had received such a terrible shock, she was never quite able to throw off its effects; and though her eyesight improved, for long she could only see very dimly.

But she was a very gentle, patient invalid, and won love from all round her by her uncomplaining endurance of weakness and pain. She knew that Hugh Gifford hated the thought of her partial blindness, and she therefore strove as much as possible to hide it. But it was sad to see the strained look in her once beautiful eyes, and her expression altogether was very touching.

And Christmas came and passed away, and then in the chill January days a little son was born at Wrothsley—a beautiful boy, handsome as his father had been in his lusty boyhood—and from the first Miss Gifford took almost entire possession of the child.

She started for the Castle immediately she heard the news, and went up to the bedroom where the young mother lay with a look of sweet joy on her face.

"So it's a boy?" she said to Nancy, in her brusque way. "Well, let me have a look at him?"

Then the nurse with great pride held up the babe, and the old woman peered long and earnestly at its face.

"A true Gifford," she said at length; "well, he's to be my boy, you know, Nancy, and I'll pay for his bringing up, and I'll make him my heir; but he must be called Thomas after his great, great grandfather, which is a better name than any of your new-fangled ones."

"You shall have your own way, Miss Gifford," smiled Nancy, "unless Hugh objects."

“ I should like to see Hugh objecting indeed ! No, my dear,” she added grimly ; “ Hugh will not object ; people are very considerate to the whims of rich old women, and he knows very well I can make little Thomas a wealthy man.”

Again Nancy smiled.

“ I have something to tell you,” she said softly, holding out her white hand, which Miss Gifford took ; “ ever since baby was born my sight seems to come back to me—God has given it to me I think to look on my darling’s face.”

Miss Gifford nodded twice, but did not speak.

“ And your husband,” she said after a little while, “ what does he say about the child ? ”

“ Oh, he is very pleased—he says he is such a handsome boy,” answered Nancy.

But she did not tell the grand-aunt all that Hugh Gifford had said when he first looked on the face of his child. During the long months of Nancy’s illness he had come and gone from Wrothsley at intervals, but had always treated her with kindness and consideration. He was sorry for her, and Nancy, who was quick-witted, understood it was pity which made him spare her any hard or reproachful words. And she understood, too, that his very nature seemed changed. True, at times he resumed his old jesting manner, but as a rule he was moody and reserved. They telegraphed to town for him when Nancy took ill, and by the time he reached Wrothsley the child was born. Then, when he saw the babe, he looked at it earnestly for a few moments, but presently turned his head away with an impatient sigh.

“ Are you not satisfied with him, Hugh ? ” asked Nancy, wistfully.

“ Yes, yes, of course,” he answered, going up to the bed and taking her hand. “ He is a handsome little fellow ; but I was thinking of what he ought to have been.”

“ You mean——”

“ I mean if that hunchback had never come here ; ” said Hugh Gifford, with an angry gleam in his hazel eyes ; “ then your boy would have been the heir, as he ought to be.”

“ He is the heir of a great deal, Hugh,” said Nancy, gently and soothingly. “ He has come into a kingdom

of love, I think; your mother is delighted with him, and I need not say what I feel."

"You look much better, at any rate, Nancy, since his arrival—and who knows? He may be the heir yet, for that hunchback will never marry, surely."

Nancy said nothing, for to mention his elder brother to him ever angered Hugh Gifford; and she had learnt that it was wiser never to breathe his name.

In all these months, indeed, Hugh Gifford had gone on hating the man who had supplanted him and struck him, with a deadly hatred. Little things were constantly reminding him of the loss of the position to which he had believed himself born, and he heard occasionally of Gerard, Lord Gilmore; heard of his follies; that he drank too much; and that his companions more befitted his rearing than his birth, and that his whole life indeed was generally discreditable.

These rumors were probably exaggerated, but Hugh Gifford listened to them eagerly, and used to shrug his shoulders contemptuously when he spoke of him. The brothers were known not to be friends, and Hugh Gifford carefully avoided any chance meeting, and Lord Gilmore made this the excuse for rarely appearing at Wrothsley, the life there being in reality too quiet and formal for his tastes.

Father Hayward had made one or two earnest efforts to lead him back into the straight path, but the graceless young lord had only laughed good-naturedly.

"I am a bit of a black sheep, you know," he said smilingly, "but I shall be always ready to give you money for charities, or the church, or that kind of thing, and that's what you priests think of most, eh?"

"You are mistaken, Lord Gilmore; what I am most anxious for is that you should worthily maintain your new position," answered the good priest.

The young man before him shrugged his shoulders, and gave a careless laugh; and one of the reasons that the new Lord Gilmore disliked going to Wrothsley for, was that he was sure to encounter Father Hayward there.

"I hate being lectured," he told Nancy, and so he went on living the life that pleased him best, and they rarely saw him at the Castle.

But he wrote Nancy a very kind letter when he heard of the baby's birth, and sent down a splendid silver

goblet as a christening-present to "little Tommy," on the occasion of Nancy's child being named plain "Thomas Gifford," by the express wish of his godmother, Miss Gifford.

As this ancient dame had foreseen, Hugh Gifford made no objection to his little son being named after his great great grandfather, as soon as he heard that Miss Gifford proposed to make the boy her heir. Miss Gifford was known to be extremely rich, and her wishes were estimated accordingly. She also soon after the christening reminded Hugh Gifford of his promise to take a house for Nancy, and placed the check to furnish it in Nancy's hands.

"Don't grudge expense," she said, if that is not enough, there is more where it came from. I want you to have a nice house of your own, and I mean to come up and stay with you sometimes. I intend to keep my eye on the boy."

Thus it happened that in the early days of March Nancy and her little son went up to town, and found a new home awaiting for them there. Hugh Gifford had taken a small but good house, looking on the park, for his wife, and Miss Gifford's generosity had sufficed to furnish it very prettily. Nancy was greatly pleased with it, and a new look of content and peace had stolen over her face, for her love seemed to make up for all. She was stronger too, now, and was nearly as handsome as she had ever been.

"She's sweeter looking to my mind even than before her accident," Miss Gifford said one day to Lady Gilmore. "Aye, it's well for women to have children, they make up for much to them."

Nancy saw her old friend Godfrey Erne before she left Wrothsley, and was struck with the change in his appearance. He was looking ill and worn, and his hair had grown slightly gray at the temples.

"I am glad to see you," said Nancy, with some agitation, as she put her hand in his, for she was remembering the moment of deadly peril they had passed together, and how she surely owed her life to Erne. "I have never seen you to thank you—for what you did—and oh! it was so terrible."

"It was terrible to me," answered Erne in a low tone, casting down his eyes.

"I am always afraid to think of it," said Nancy nervously.

"Do not think of it, then," said Erne with an effort and a forced smile ; "so I hear you are going to live in town ?"

"Yes, Mr. Gifford has taken a house there, and your old friend Miss Gifford has most kindly furnished it for us, and I hope you will come and see us, Major Erne, when you are up in town ?"

"I shall be very pleased to do so."

"And you've not seen baby ?" said Nancy with a pretty blush, rising and ringing the bell for the child ; and when he was brought in she took him in her arms and carried him up to Erne to be admired.

"He's a fine little fellow," said Erne, without enthusiasm ; and he just touched one of the pink, tiny, doubled fists with his hand, and then turned away his head ; and Nancy could not understand why he did not wish to kiss her babe !

In fact she perceived that Master Tommy seemed to have a depressing effect on Erne, and so, feeling a little hurt and not a little astonished, she gave him back to his nurse and began to talk of Miss Gifford.

"She is baby's godmother, you know," she informed him, as though the news would be of great interest to her visitor ; "and she insisted on him being called after her brother, who was Sir Thomas Gifford before he became Lord Gilmore ; but I must have a pretty pet name for baby. Tom is so ugly, and Tommy worse, don't you think ?"

Erne gave rather a grim laugh.

"There is not much to choose between them certainly ; but Thomas is a respectable rich-sounding name. I wish my godfathers and godmothers had called me 'Thomas.'"

"Godfrey is much prettier," said Nancy, smiling ; "yes, I must have a pretty pet name for the boy."

"She thinks of nothing but the boy," thought Erne a little bitterly ; and shortly afterwards he rose and took his leave, and his heart felt very sad and weary as he rode down the long avenue at Wrothsley.

But the grandest and happiest day for Nancy was after she arrived at her new house in town, when she carried baby for the first time to see her mother. When the time of her trial had drawn near, Nancy had most earnestly desired to have her mother with her ; but as Hugh Gifford

never proposed this, Nancy remembering what he had said regarding her own family, had suppressed this most urgent wish of her heart, and Mrs. Loftus had endured the most painful anxiety on her account until she heard of her safety.

Now the mother and daughter met with joy that was too deep for words. And the boy!

"Isn't he lovely?" said Nancy naively, uncovering the little face which she thought the most beautiful on earth, and gazing at it with enraptured eyes. And we may be sure the granddame did not disappoint her as Erne had done. Mrs. Loftus was, indeed, nearly as much delighted with it as Nancy herself, and then the baby aunt was brought down to kiss her new nephew, and altogether this meeting was a very happy one; Aunt Fannie happily having spent the winter abroad, and thus not being present to mar it.

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But now shall we leave Nancy for a while to her simple baby worship, and take a glimpse of another life—the life of a woman, too—who (on the same fair spring morning that Nancy first took her boy to see her mother) was standing in a garden at Maidenhead, looking with languid interest at the green buds appearing on the dark boughs and listening vaguely to the love songs of the birds.

A pretty woman this, young and fair, with a certain rustic beauty about her appearance that suited well her present surroundings. She bore the name, too, of Mrs. May, and lived in the picturesque, roomy, old-fashioned, red brick house, o'er whose moss-grown walks she was now pensively standing.

Presently she heard a footstep behind her, and she turned round with a smile and a quick blush.

"I am so glad you have come out, Gerard," she said, "it is so lonely here."

"And are you sentimentalizing as usual, Madame May?" answered Gerard, with a good-natured little laugh.

He was smoking a cigarette, and his head was uncovered, and he was rather carelessly dressed. But there was no mistaking the handsome face, the smiling hazel eyes, and the unfortunate defect in his form. Yes, this was Gerard, Lord Gilmore, and the fair woman he called Madame May, and who now put her arm fondly through

his, was no other than the pretty girl he had loved on the wild sea coast, and who for his sake had secretly quitted her father's house, and well-nigh broken the old man's heart.

To do the young man justice, however, he kept his word to May, and married her on the very day that she fled to him. Married her in secret, and made her swear to keep the secret until he chose to reveal it. She was thus called Mrs. May at the house at Maidenhead, and was regarded as its mistress. Gerard, Lord Gilmore did not always live there, but he very often did so, and he used it to invite his friends down the river, and they made merry in the old-fashioned garden, beneath the shady trees; and thus in all probability arose the rumors of the new lord's dissolute life, that from time to time reached his brother's ears.

"Let us take a turn or two, Gerard, on the low walk," presently said May to him; "it is so pretty to see the sun shining on the river from there."

So the two walked arm-in-arm down the garden together, May leaning on his affectionately, and looking from time to time rather wistfully in his face, as if she were thinking of something.

"Gerard," she said, at length, "I've got something to say to you."

"Well, May, what is it?" he answered.

She hesitated a moment, cast down her eyes, and then again suddenly looked up.

"It's about telling people that we are married—how long do you think we need keep the secret now? It's not about myself, Gerard," she added, quickly, noting that his expression changed, "but about poor father, and——"

"Oh, by-and-bye, no hurry yet; but it will be all right, so don't worry yourself, May—and now it's so fine I think I'll go and have a row on the river, for I've got a bit of a headache," said Lord Gilmore, rather quickly, as May paused, for he hated to be worried, and to be reminded of his marriage he regarded as worry.

She said nothing more, but she sighed softly as he turned to leave her, and kept walking pensively up and down the garden walk, while Gilmore ran into the house and put on a blue cloth rowing cap, and five minutes later was pulling vigorously up the river.

As he went on he passed a lady, also rowing alone in a small boat, whose striking and picturesque appearance instantly attracted his attention. She was dark and beautiful, and wore a small scarlet cap somewhat coquettishly placed on her well-poised head.

Gilmore looked at her boldly enough as he rowed past her boat, and for a moment the lady glanced at him with the most lovely lustrous dark eyes, he told himself, he had ever seen. The next moment, however, she gave a little scream, and Gilmore then at once saw she had contrived to drop one of her oars into the river, which the tide was rapidly carrying away from her.

With a smile he immediately turned his boat and went in pursuit of the floating oar. He soon caught it, and then pulled back again, and drew up alongside the lady's boat, and presented the oar to her with a bow.

"Oh, thanks, thanks so much," she said, in English, but with a slight foreign accent. "What should I have done if I had not been so fortunate as to have met you?"

"The good fortune was all on my side," answered Lord Gilmore, smiling, "to have been of the slightest use to you."

"How good of you to say so! I was not thinking of my poor oars, I fear, but of the lovely day; and then I am not used to your English rivers."

"What country then was lucky enough——" began Gilmore, and then he paused as he did not know exactly how to complete his sentence, and as he did so the lady laughed prettily, and showed her white and even teeth.

"I came from France—the south of France," she said; "and Monsieur?" she added, with interest.

"Oh! I'm thoroughly English," answered Gilmore with a little laugh.

"With an English name? Some of your English names sound so strange to my ears."

"My name is English enough too—I am Lord Gilmore—Gerard, Lord Gilmore."

"Gerard, Lord Gilmore," repeated the lady in softest accents: "it is a lovely name!"

"And may I ask the name of the lovely lady who is talking to me?" asked Gilmore, who was highly delighted with the compliment, and quite vain enough to believe that the dark-eyed lady admired him.

"I am named Madame de Costa; my husband was a Portuguese gentleman."

“Is Madame a widow then?”

“I have that misfortune;” and Madame de Costa cast down her dark eyes, but the next moment she lifted them, and smiled in Gilmore’s face.

“I am most happy to have made Madame’s acquaintance,” said Gilmore, raising his blue cloth cap from his handsome head.

“And—I, too, am happy—to know Lord Gilmore.”

“Shall we row up the stream a bit together, then?” suggested Gilmore; and Madame bowed smilingly, and began once more to dip her oars in the shining river.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SECOND MEETING.

GERARD, Lord Gilmore, never forgot this first meeting with the beautiful Frenchwoman as she called herself, on the broad and sunlit waters of the Thames. It did not last very long, for Madame de Costa soon tired, or affected to tire, of the exertion of rowing, but it lasted long enough to fill Gilmore’s heart with absolute enthusiasm for her beauty.

After they had proceeded about a quarter-of-a-mile further up the river, from the point where they first met, Madame stretched out one of her white, uncovered hands towards a little villa, standing with only the depth of the garden in front of it from the water’s edge.

“That is my small nest,” she said, “that I have taken for your English summer; then, when your fogs come I must fly southward.”

“And you live there, all alone?” asked Gilmore.

“All alone,” answered Madame, smiling; “and now I am going to pull ashore, for my arms do ache so badly with the weight of the oars.”

She pushed back her sleeves, as she spoke, and showed her beautiful white arms to Gilmore’s admiring gaze.

“Let me row you in, if you are tired,” he said, rising in his boat; “see, and he caught hold of hers, “I can soon change if you will give me leave?”

"I do give you leave, Lord Gilmore."

A minute later Gilmore was beside her, and had taken her oars from her willing hands.

"But your boat?" she said.

"It must take its chance; I will catch it up if you will lend me yours, after I have seen you safely ashore."

He then rowed her in, up to a sort of stockade at the foot of the garden of the villa, which parted it from the river, and formed a barrier against its encroachments, and on one of the posts of this stockade, a dark swarthy looking man was sitting contentedly, fishing.

"Does that black-browed fellow belong to you?" asked Gilmore.

"Yes, that is my servant," she answered.

"He looks like a Spaniard," said Gilmore.

At this moment the man, having seen them approaching, carefully laid his fishing-rod on the top of the stockade, and went towards the landing-place, while Madame de Costa gave him some directions in Spanish, of which Gilmore did not understand a single word.

The swarthy black-browed man grinned as he answered also in Spanish, and Gilmore noticed he had an evil, though somewhat handsome, face. He pulled in the boat, and was about to hand Madame out of it, when Gilmore leaped ashore, and eagerly offered his assistance, which Madame gracefully accepted.

"I must thank you again," she said, as they stood a moment or two together on the landing place.

"What for?" he answered smilingly, with his bright hazel eyes fixed on her face.

"For saving my poor oar—perhaps my life."

"May I ask some reward, then?" said Gilmore boldly, "for my small service, if you deem it one?"

"And what do you wish?"

"To see you sometimes; to be allowed to visit you sometimes?"

"I will be very glad to see Lord Gilmore."

Again, Gilmore raised his blue cloth cap, and then stepped back into Madame's boat.

"I will come to-morrow," he said smiling, "do not be so cruel as to refuse to see me, Madame?"

She smiled too, and then bade the Spaniard, whom she called Juan, get into the boat also, to bring it back after Gilmore had reclaimed his own. Then, she stood and

watched them row out, and Gilmore's hazel eyes were still fixed upon her face.

But as they passed out of sight, her expression suddenly changed, and a tragic, even terrible, look stole over her beautiful features.

"He is too like—too like the other," she murmured, clasping her hand over her heart, as if to still its wild throbbings, "but for his sake—I must not hesitate."

Long she stood there with her eyes fixed on the shining river, but she was not thinking of the golden gleams on the rippling tide. Juan rowed in presently, and grinned again at her, as he secured the boat to the stockade, and then calmly resumed his fishing, but Madame de Costa neither looked at him nor spoke to him. Presently, however, she roused herself from her abstraction, and in her languid, graceful fashion proceeded up the garden to the villa, which she entered by one of the windows, that opened on the little terrace in front. Then she went through the luxuriously furnished room she had entered, into an inner room beyond, and kneeling down before an inlaid cabinet, she unlocked it with a little golden key, that hung from her girdle.

Still kneeling she drew forth from this cabinet a portrait—the portrait of a man young and handsome—and kissed it passionately, pressing it against her bosom as if it were some living thing.

"My beloved, my beloved, for thy sake," she murmured, as she gazed with her dark lustrous eyes on the smiling pictured face.

"But they are too like, too like," she repeated again below her breath, and a moan escaped her lips, as if wrung forth by some strong mental agony. And while she still knelt thus, another woman entered the room; a woman long past her first youth, and dark and swarthy-looking like the Spaniard Juan, to whom she bore a strong resemblance.

"Well," she said in Spanish, addressing Madame de Costa familiarly, "have you snared the bird yet? I saw you from the windows row in with a man."

"Be silent! be silent!" cried Madame de Costa with sudden anger in her tone, rising to her feet. "Go from this room—I do not want to talk."

The Spanish woman shrugged her shoulders and obeyed her, and then Madame de Costa having once more kissed

the portrait, locked it away, and sat down by one of the windows of the room ; sat with clasped hands and dreamy eyes, her heart full of strange, terrible, yet oftentimes tender, thoughts.

In the meanwhile Gilmore was rowing down the river towards Maidenhead full of excitement. Never before had he looked on such a face as Madame de Costa's he told himself ; never before seen such a perfect form. He was an ardent admirer of beauty, and the rich Southern tints, the wondrous lustre in Madame's dark eyes seemed completely to have fascinated him.

"She is more like some lovely Andalusian woman, than a Frenchwoman," he thought, recalling Madame's charms, "but she said the South of France, so very likely she has some Spanish blood in her veins."

He was still thinking of her when he reached Maidenhead, and after leaving his boat, walked up to the pleasant old house he had bought there, which stood amidst some green fields, a little apart from the town. As he entered the garden he heard voices, and when he neared the house, saw standing before it, enjoying the sunshine, May and Mr. Whitmore, who was the young man who had accidentally encountered John Sumners at Gilmore's rooms in town.

"Ah, Whitmore," cried Gilmore, for he was always hospitable, "run down to have a breath of fresh air, eh? Awfully glad to see you."

"Thanks, old fellow," answered Mr. Whitmore, shaking Gilmore's outstretched hand ; "I was just telling Mrs. May here, it's such a lovely day I thought I would look you up."

"Delighted to see you—come into the house and have a drink ; I've been rowing and I feel confoundedly thirsty."

But not during this "drink," nor the many "drinks" that followed during the course of the day, did Gilmore give one hint of his adventure with the dark-eyed woman, on the river. Nor did he speak of it to May, and yet it was always present in his mind, and to his secret annoyance he found that Mr. Whitmore not only intended to spend the day, but to remain all night also at the Rookery, as the old house he had bought was named, because in their mysterious fashion a small colony of the sable-hued birds had dwelt for generations in some ancient elms at the garden foot,

Gilmore was too hospitable to hint that he wished his friend to go, and to his vexation Mr. Whitmore remained ; remained all night and the best part of the next day, and it was late in the afternoon before Gilmore found himself free.

"I am going for a row up the river," he told May, "now we've got rid of that fellow."

"It will be very nice on the river now," said May, a little wistfully, for she also thought she should like a row.

But Gilmore did not offer to take her, and indeed made haste to leave the house, lest she should ask to accompany him. Soon then he found himself swiftly passing through the water, on his way to the little river-side villa, and as he drew near it, he perceived Madame de Costa sitting idly in a boat, just in front of the stockade, and the Spaniard Juan fishing from precisely the same spot where he had been sitting yesterday.

Madame turned quickly round when the dip of Gilmore's oars fell on her ears, and her rich olive tinted complexion paled a little as she recognized him. Then Gilmore rowed up beside her boat, and taking off his cap, bowed low his handsome head.

"I could not have the pleasure of coming before," he began with an ingenuous blush ; "I was so awfully vexed, Madame, not to get earlier, but a fellow came down from town to see me, and stopped all night, and he's only just gone, or I should have been here before."

"All in good time," smiled Madame graciously.

"It seemed a most awfully long time to me to wait, I know," said Gilmore, "it's close on seven now, and I know it's too late to intrude on you for a morning call ; but still I was determined to see you if I could—and I am very glad to see you."

"This hour is pretty on the water I think," said Madame, looking pensively round, "the shadows from the trees and the clouds quiver on the river's breast."

"I know what is prettier than either the shadows or the clouds," answered Gilmore ardently, with his eyes fixed on her face.

She smiled, but made no answer, and the next moment bent forward and dipped one of her beautiful hands into the water, and Gilmore saw that on her slim fingers she wore several valuable rings.

"Would you like to row a little further up the stream ?"

he asked ; "because, if so, I shall be delighted to have the honor of rowing you."

But Madame gently shook her head.

"No," she said, "but if Lord Gilmore will land I shall be glad to show him over my poor house."

"Only too happy," said Gilmore eagerly, and then Madame beckoned with languid grace to Juan to pull in her boat, which was secured to the stockade by a tow rope, while a few strokes of his oar brought Gilmore's boat also to the landing-place.

He sprang quickly out to assist her, and then, side-by-side, they walked together up the garden of the villa, and Madame told Gilmore she had expected to see him in the morning.

"I thought perhaps you might come, so I sat in my little arbor beneath the trees, and listened to the singing of the birds. That is my arbor," and she pointed to a rustic seat placed below the spreading boughs of some trees.

"Shall we sit there now?" said Gilmore.

"If you wish it, yes—and you can talk to me there and tell me all about your past days."

"I do indeed wish it—and I feel as if I could tell you everything."

They sat down together on the seat, and Madame began smilingly to question Gilmore.

"And are you a bachelor?" she said.

"Yes," untruthfully and unblushingly affirmed Gilmore.

"That is strange," said Madame, as if musingly.

"I may not always be one, you know."

"No, my lord will be wedding some pretty blue-eyed English miss."

"I like dark eyes better than blue ones—dark eyes full of fire and beauty like—but perhaps you will be angry with me, Madame, if I go on."

"What do you want to say?"

"I was going to say like yours—I never saw such eyes before."

"Perhaps my lord has said that to many women?"

"No, I've not," answered Gilmore bluntly ; "many women could not make me feel as you do, Madame."

"Hark ! listen !" she said the next moment laying one of her supple white fingers for an instant on his arm ; "hear yon bird telling his love tale."

It was a robin singing to his mate, pouring forth his clear notes from one of the topmost branches of a tree near them.

They sat in silence for a short while after this—a dangerous silence to Gilmore, who every moment felt the subtle attraction of this woman becoming stronger to him. They sat until the moon rose, and the dusk stole around them, and Gilmore utterly forgot that May would be waiting dinner for him, and be naturally uneasy at his lengthened absence. Then, at last, Madame gave a little shiver and rose.

“The night grows chill,” she said; “my lord must come again and talk to me;” and she held out her white hand in token of farewell, and Gilmore bent down and ardently kissed it.

“You make me too happy by giving me permission to do so,” he said. “What hour to-morrow may I come?”

“Come and have lunch—that will be best—then we can have a long, long talk.”

They settled it thus, and lingeringly and unwillingly Gilmore left her, and when he reached the landing-place, found Juan smoking, and actually fishing by moonlight! The Spaniard grinned out his white teeth, and assisted Gilmore to push off his boat, though they mutually could not understand a word the other said, and Gilmore left a gold piece in the Spaniard’s swarthy palm.

Then he rowed down the river, in the gleaming moonlight, breaking forth into snatches of song, as his boat glided through the water. He was in truth so excited that he could not hide it from May’s anxious eyes, when he reached home, who eagerly inquired where he had been.

“I met a fellow in the town, who had a horse to sell, and I went to see him,” answered Gilmore with affected carelessness, “and we got on talking—but I’m sorry you’ve waited for me, May, you should have got your dinner.”

“No Gerard, I could not do that,” she answered; and then the two sat down to dinner, and May noticed he scarcely ate anything, and that his face was flushed, and his eyes sparkling, and that he was a great deal more silent than his wont.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TIGHTENING OF THE CHAIN.

HE kept his promise and went the next day to have lunch with Madame de Costa—telling May he was going up the river with some men—and he sat in the sunny garden, and listened again to the singing of the birds, and to the sweet, low voice by his side.

Everything in the villa told of ease of circumstances, except the small number of domestic attendants. The dark-browed Spanish woman waited at the table, and the dark-browed Spaniard cooked the meal. But what did this matter to Gilmore? He was not thinking of the dishes before him, but of the beautiful woman whose face haunted him when he was absent from her, and from whose features when she was present his hazel eyes could not stray.

The food, it must be admitted, had a strong flavor of garlic, but the wine which Madame de Costa offered her guest was of rare vintage, and great price, and Gilmore drank of it freely, and the generous beverage loosed his tongue. He found himself telling her the romantic story of his babyhood, boyhood and youth, and how his brother “a conceited stuck-up fool of a fellow,” took everything he could get from him, and yet, actually had not the decency to be civil.

“I cut his face for him once, though,” added Gilmore with a laugh, and he never noticed Madame’s expression as he spoke. “He said something impudent to me, and I flung a wine-glass at his head, and serve him right!”

Madame said no word; she rose from the table hastily while he went on boasting, and presently proposed that they should go and sit under the trees, in the garden, and that Isabel should carry the wine there. Gilmore was delighted to do this, and began telling Madame of his great wealth, and of the splendors of Wrothsley, and once he accidentally mentioned the name of his brother’s wife.

“And what is she like?” asked Madame turning sud-

denly round, and looking at him with her great eyes lit with suppressed emotion, "This wife?"

"A great deal too good for him," answered Gilmore; "she's very pretty for one thing, and for another she's a sweet little girl, and I really like her—they have got a boy now."

"Ah—," and with a quick movement Madame put her hand to her heart as if in sudden pain, and grew deadly pale.

"You are not ill, are you?" asked Gilmore, looking at her.

"It was a spasm—I have them sometimes—"

"Why, you have grown quite pale," said Gilmore more anxiously; "let me give you some wine, and do let me persuade you to drink it."

He poured out some of the sparkling champagne as he spoke, and handed it to Madame, who eagerly drank it.

"It soothes pain," she said with a half bitter laugh; "It makes us forget."

"You are looking better now—you gave me quite a fright, do you know."

"It is good of my lord to say so—but come, we must not get sad. Do you love the mandoline? Juan and Isabel do sing to it—the songs of their native land."

"I should like to hear them."

"I shall bid them commence then, and return in a few moments to my lord, who must smoke his cigarettes meanwhile."

She rose as she spoke, and returned to the villa, and was absent nearly a quarter-of-an-hour, and all the while Gilmore was thinking of her and her wondrous beauty, though he did not neglect also to quench his thirst occasionally with the good wine before him, and took Madame's advice concerning the cigarettes.

Then she came back and sat by his side, having now flung a black Spanish lace mantilla round her shapely head, and fastened a yellow rosebud in her hair, as if purposely to enhance her rich loveliness; and scarcely had she returned, when unseen somewhere beneath the trees, the mandoline players began to sing.

The woman commenced the first verse in a full contralto voice, and Juan answered from a distant part of the garden probably from his favorite seat on the stockade by the river edge—in passionate and melodious strains,

"They are singing of love," said Madame softly.

"No other theme would be suitable here," answered Gilmore ardently, "to be here and not to love would be impossible."

"And does my lord feel happy here?"

"Happy! only too happy—when I am here I forget everything else—my whole soul is here."

And so he went on talking folly, and the beautiful woman by his side listened with smiles and sighs. She had not the resources of an Englishwoman in conversation, and had to make up with semi-tender glances of her lustrous eyes, and pretty flatteries which Gilmore's vain heart loved. He made another appointment with her before he left her, and the next day went up to town to purchase some jewel that he thought would be worthy of her acceptance, and in his open-handed generous fashion threw away many hundreds on the bauble.

But to his great surprise, Madame refused to accept his gift.

"No, I take no gifts," she said, drawing back.

"But surely a little thing like this—just to please me," pleaded Gilmore.

But no—Madame was firm—she would accept nothing, and Gilmore was forced to carry his diamonds away with him, but left Madame more infatuated than ever.

And so days stole on, and weeks, and Gilmore used to sit in the sunny garden, and listen to the mandoline players and the birds, and never grow weary. He knew nothing of stormy scenes which took place, sometimes there, when he was absent; nothing of a rare and secret visitor who went and stole away, always in the dark hours. When he was at the villa there were only soft words spoken, and soft sounds heard. Juan sat fishing all day long, apparently, with his mandoline oftentimes lying beside him, and would grin and open his greedy palms, for the gold coins which Gilmore so freely thrust into them.

He never saw the ugly looks which followed his departing footsteps; never dreamed of any evil, except the dream of false love, in which he was daily becoming faster and faster entangled. He would not even listen now to poor May's entreaties to have their marriage acknowledged; and would make her no promise when it would be. She could not understand what had come over

him and changed him so, for Gilmore kept his visits to the riverside villa a profound secret, and never once breathed Madame de Costa's name.

At last towards the end of April—on the 28th—as they stood alone together beneath the trees in the garden, just about a month after they had first met, in ardent and impassioned language, Gilmore dared to speak of the love which now so completely filled his heart.

And the woman to whom he spoke, listened as though half reluctantly; listened with downcast eyes and heaving breast. But she let her hands rest in his, and did not reproach him for his fond and eager words.

“If you could love me only a little—ever so little,” pleaded Gilmore.

“Must it be a little?” she whispered beneath her breath, and as the words past her lips, Gilmore caught her in his arms, and poured the most passionate vows and protestations in her shrinking ears.

.

The next day—April 29th—he told May he was going up to town by the night train to attend a ball given by one of his bachelor friends, but that he would be back the following morning probably by mid-day at latest.

He dined at home, but left the Rookery in time to catch a late train up to London, and told May that he preferred to walk to the station. He had sent on some luggage addressed to his bachelor rooms in Piccadilly during the morning, and he wore a thin overcoat when he started. May went with him to the hall door, but when she raised her face to give him a farewell kiss, he hesitated a moment, and then stooped down and kissed her on the brow.

“Take care of yourself,” he said, not unkindly, and after shaking hands with her he went out, and disappeared in the darkness, for the night was wet and gloomy, and May was left to her own sad thoughts.

She sat down wearily after he was gone, for she was quite sure in her own heart now that Gilmore had ceased to love her. She sat while the wind began to moan about the house, and the rain beat against the window panes. It blew a complete storm presently, carrying May's thoughts back to the wild northern coast where she had been born, and to the father she had forsaken.

She sighed heavily, still thinking of the old man, and

his sorrow and loneliness. Perhaps the love which had failed her, and grown so cold in Gilmore's heart, was a fit punishment for her fault she thought. And that night she dreamed of John Sumners, and saw his rugged and workworn face looking at her earnestly, with love still shining in his honest eyes.

And she dreamed, too, of a black shadow dogging Gilmore's footsteps in the darkness—a thing of evil she could not see—hidden, impalpable, and yet there; and the poor young wife awoke with a cry of horror, and shudderingly covered her face, and lay with beating fearful heart listening to the moaning of the wind.

And another young wife awoke also that night pale and afraid in the midnight hours, for she heard her baby cry. The storm was at its height, raging over London as it was raging over the dark waters of the Thames, as it rolled on through green fields and willowed sedges, long ere it reached the foulness of the great city. And as the blast howled by the little house that looked on the park where Nancy lived, it roused the child lying in the cot, and awoke the mother from her light and restless slumbers.

Nancy rose and went to the babe and lifted it in her arms, and pillowed its head upon her breast, trying to soothe it with her tender words. It seemed still uneasy and disturbed, and so she began walking up and down the room with it, crooning to it softly as she went. Then the baby put up its small pink hand against her cheek and Nancy tenderly kissed the little palm.

"My darling!" she whispered, gazing down fondly on its face.

Yes, she had her boy, she told herself; her baby to love and cling to, whatever else might change. It was a month now since she had come to this house, and during this time Hugh Gifford's varying moods, and strange unsettled habits had filled her heart with vague and constant uneasiness.

She could not understand him, in fact, for one day he would seem fond to her, and the next cold and harsh. Often she thought of the handsome lover who had wooed her in the dim corridor at Wrothsley, and wondered if the moody man, who came and went at uncertain hours, could really be the same?

A rumor, too, reached her ears that Hugh Gifford now gambled heavily, and in the evenings he was rarely at home. Still Nancy had her child—the beautiful boy who smiled in her face, and whom she used to take to her mother's house, and exhibit with great pride his baby feats, and wonderful intelligence! Hugh Gifford, too, was fond of his little son, and proud also of his remarkable likeness to himself.

Miss Gifford had been once to town for a few days to visit them, and always spoke of Nancy's baby as "my boy." She had arranged also that Nancy and the child were to stay with her in the autumn, and she insisted upon paying all expenses connected with him.

"He is my heir, and I can afford it," she would say, and Nancy was obliged to let the wilful old lady have her own way, and certainly Master Thomas was always dressed like a prince.

So up and down on this stormy night—the 29th of April—Nancy kept walking with her baby in her arms. The bedroom was dimly lighted by the firelight only, and a nightlight, but the door of the dressing-room, where Hugh Gifford slept, was open, and there the gas was burning.

It was past midnight now, and as Nancy went by the dressing-room door she glanced in to see if her husband was asleep, as she was afraid the baby's crying might awaken him. But the room was empty; Hugh Gifford had not come in, and nearly an hour passed before he did so. By this time the baby had fallen asleep, but Nancy did not put him back in his cot, but laid him in her own bed, and sat by his side watching him.

Tick, tick went the clock; howling round and down the chimneys swept the blast, splashing against the window panes came the rain. Suddenly Nancy heard the handle of the dressing-room door turn, and a man's hasty footsteps enter the room. She rose quickly, meaning to warn Hugh Gifford to make as little noise as possible so as not to wake the child.

With noiseless footsteps she crossed the room, and stole to the dressing-room door, which was slightly ajar. What made her start, grow pale, and with difficulty suppress the exclamation that rose on her lips? There stood Hugh Gifford, and the gaslight fell on his pale, haggard, even ghastly, face. And his expression—the expression of horror, loathing and fear—that distorted his features, terrified Nancy, who drew back afraid and trembling.

He never saw her as she crouched there ; never saw her as he poured out some brandy, and drank it without stopping, and then began to tear off his overcoat, and flung something large, round and heavy, that he was carrying, with absolute loathing on the floor. Again he drank some brandy, then Nancy saw him lift the thing he had flung away, and push it into one of his wardrobes, and carefully lock the door after he had done this, and then place the key in his dressing case, which he also locked.

Then he began to take off his drenched clothes, but that awful expression never for one moment left his face ; and presently Nancy, pale, and shaking in every limb, stole away from the door, and crept into bed beside her baby, holding it closely to her breast as if to guard and protect it.

And the wind howled on, and the dark hours fled by, but Nancy never slept. It was growing light, when a sort of cry from the dressing-room suddenly startled her, and set her heart beating wildly. Again she crept out of bed, and stole to the dressing-room door, and peering in, saw Hugh Gifford lying on the bed talking wildly in his sleep.

“Are you sure, quite sure, he is dead?” she heard him say, “don’t for God’s sake put him in unless you are sure !”

Then he went rambling on speaking words Nancy could not follow—using endearing phrases in some foreign tongue—mixed with weird haunting images of hidden crime and sudden death. It was terrible to listen to him ; so terrible that Nancy could not bear it, but crept back again to her baby’s side, and fell down on her knees by the bed, praying God to protect the little one from evil.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WAITING FOR GERARD.

THE next morning, the 30th of April, was a fine day. That is, the sun shone out in fitful gleams between the broken, fast-drifting clouds, and as its rays stole through the blinds of May’s room at the Rookery, near Maidenhead, she rose, went to the window, drew up the blind,

and tried to shake off the depressing effects of her bad dreams of the night before.

"I hope the wind was not so bad at sea," she thought, pitifully, for her mind still lingered on the old days, and the old man who dwelt on the storm-washed coast. "Poor father," she kept thinking softly, recalling how vividly his rugged, weather-beaten features had appeared to her in her dreams, and how kindly John Sumners' blue eyes had gazed at his absent child.

Then her thoughts turned to Gilmore—to "Gerard"—as she still always called him, and she kept musing on his strange fate.

"We should have been far happier if they had never taken him from Cragside Farm," she reflected, sadly enough; "he would have been content with me then, and not ashamed of his wife as he is now. But I must just try to make the best of it, and dress and be more like the ladies that he mixes with, I suppose.

In pursuance of this resolution poor May got out her last new morning gown—a delicate soft blue material trimmed with cream lace—which suited well her fair skin and light hair, and proceeded to adorn herself in it in expectation of her husband's return. Then, after breakfast, she went into the rain-washed garden, the leaves still spangled with moisture, and selected some pink hyacinths to adorn her rooms, placing one also near her own pretty throat. After this she ordered lunch—taking care that the viands were those that Gilmore loved—and then she waited for him, but she waited in vain.

Noon came, when he had said he would be back, and then the afternoon glided away, and still there was no sign of Gilmore. May was not exactly uneasy, because when he went up to town he sometimes remained a few days, but to do him justice he always let her know when he was going to do this. But when the evening came, and then night, and he was still absent, she began to be very anxious and afraid.

And the night passed as the day had done, and then the next day, but on the third day May could bear it no longer. She therefore wrote an urgent letter to Gilmore at his rooms in Piccadilly, telling him how uneasy she was at not having heard from him, and asking him when he received her letter to telegraph a reply to it.

She waited hour after hour for her telegram, and none

came. She waited until the last post came in, and there was no letter, and then she felt sure that something must have happened to her husband. Could he be ill—or—and her heart seemed to faint within her, and her face grew deadly pale. Could he have left her for another? He had been changed of late May knew well—changed and cold—and was this the end of it?

May tortured herself by these surmises and miserable doubts all through a sleepless night, and then on the fourth day of Gilmore's absence, she wrote to Mr. Whitmore, whose address she knew, and whom she knew also to be a friend of Gilmore's, asking him if he knew anything of his whereabouts.

To this letter she received a reply in the shape of a telegram from Mr. Whitmore, on the same day that she sent it, to tell her that he would be at Maidenhead early the next morning. Then another sleepless night had to be borne—a night haunted by dire forebodings—and about twelve o'clock Mr. Whitmore arrived at the Rookery, and with trembling footsteps May went downstairs to hear his news.

He had none to give her! He had neither seen nor heard of Gilmore, and could not understand his disappearance.

"He went up to town on the night of the 29th of April," said May, with faltering lips; "he said he would be home next day—he said he was going to a dance given by some bachelor friend of his—he left here in time to catch the nine train."

"It would be Escourt's dance," interrupted Mr. Whitmore eagerly, as May paused; "I was there and Escourt told me Gilmore was expected and we wondered that he never cast up, and the next morning——"

But now Mr. Whitmore paused and hesitated, and cast down his eyes.

"Oh, go on, go on," cried May; "tell me all you know."

"I am afraid of alarming you—but still, I had better tell you, I think. Well, the next morning after Escourt's dance, I went to Gilmore's rooms in Piccadilly, as I thought he might be in town, and I saw the landlord. Gilmore had not arrived in town the night before, though he had been expected, for he had sent on a portmanteau there during the day, as he always did when he was coming up for the night. That is all I know, and the next

thing I heard of him was when I received your letter yesterday."

"Then—then something must have happened to him!" burst from May's pale lips, and she clasped her hands together despairingly.

"It is very strange, certainly; suppose I go to the station here and inquire if he did go up to town on the night of the 29th; they are sure to know him by sight there."

"Oh! yes, yes. Oh! please go, Mr. Whitmore. Oh! what shall I do?"

"Don't distress yourself, Mrs. May," said Whitmore, kindly; "I dare say he'll cast up all right; he's a thoughtless fellow, you know, but he certainly should have written. However, I'll go to the station and inquire."

And Mr. Whitmore did go to the station and inquire, and the stationmaster remembered the night of the 29th of April perfectly, because it was the night of the storm, the man said.

"And do you know Lord Gilmore by sight?" asked Mr. Whitmore.

"Oh! yes, sir, very well indeed," answered the stationmaster; he constantly comes and hangs about the book-stalls here and gets the papers and that kind of thing, though I've not seen him for a day or two, when I think of it."

"And did he go up to town on the 29th of April in the nine o'clock train?" now inquired Whitmore.

The stationmaster smiled.

"Not in the nine, sir, but in the eleven train," he answered, "and to tell you the truth I thought his lordship was a bit on, when he came into the station to take his ticket, for he had a queer wild look altogether; but, of course, there is no mistaking him on account of his figure."

"No, of course not, and you are quite sure he went up to town in the eleven train on that night?"

"As sure as I am standing here, sir, I spoke to him and said what a wild night it was, and he answered somewhat indistinctly, and that was what made me think he had taken a drop too much."

"It is very odd—he was expected at a dance in town that night, and he never appeared. I am really beginning to be afraid something has happened,"

The stationmaster was, of course, all curiosity and sympathy, and Whitmore walked back to the Rookery, with a moody brow and an uneasy heart. He was forced to tell May what he had heard, and he could not deny that Gilmore's disappearance was, to say the least, both alarming and mysterious.

She broke into a passionate fit of tears when she heard what he had to tell her, and seemed overwhelmed with grief.

"Oh! I dreamt that night something was following him!" she cried; something evil. Oh! Mr. Whitmore, what shall we do?"

"Well, I think the best thing will be for me to go back to town at once, and if nothing has been heard of him at his rooms, or at his clubs, I think the police ought to be at once communicated with, and a regular search instituted."

"He—may have been robbed—and——" wept May, who was sobbing as if her heart would break.

"We must hope for the best—please do not distress yourself so dreadfully, Mrs. May—I will telegraph to you at once after I have made the inquiries in town."

"And—the stationmaster was—quite sure he went by the eleven train, not by the nine?"

"Quite sure; and he said he seemed to have been drinking. Was he quite sober when he left here?"

"Quite, quite sober; he would take nothing at dinner but a little claret; I noticed he took much less than usual."

"Then, he must have been somewhere you know in this place from nine o'clock until close on eleven when he went to the station. Does he know any of the people here?"

"I don't think he knows anyone; sometimes he goes with young men to the hotels, but very seldom; young men who come down from London."

"I had best inquire here first then," said Whitmore; but no one had seen Lord Gilmore in Maidenhead on the night of the 29th of April, until he had gone to the station.

Whitmore returned to the Rookery to tell May this and then started at once for town, leaving the poor young woman a prey to the most terrible anxiety. Hour after hour she spent pacing her room with restless footsteps,

or going to the gateway of the garden looking eagerly out for the expected telegram from Whitmore.

It came about seven o'clock and was very disheartening :

"No one has seen or heard of him in town : have communicated with the police ; one of the inspectors and myself will be with you early to-morrow.

"WHITMORE."

Then when May read this she felt her cup of woe was full, and in passionate and brokenhearted accents she called on her father to come to her ; and the servants listening to her wild words, knew something dreadful had happened, and it began to be whispered about that the hunchbacked young lord had disappeared, and many strange surmises were made.

"He's just got tired of her and run away with some one else," suggested the women.

"He was a wild young fellow, and was probably drunk when he got into the train, and some scoundrel has knocked him on the head for the sake of his watch, and purse," said the men.

"He must have been somewhere from nine to eleven o'clock," said the police ; but the remarks made no one any wiser.

Gilmore had left the Rookery about a quarter to nine o'clock on April 29th, and nothing more could be heard of him again in Maidenhead until he appeared at the station, at about five minutes to eleven o'clock. Where he had been in the interval no one could find out ; after he entered the train he was never seen more.

CHAPTER XL.

JUAN'S SONG.

THE next day the London detectives arrived at Maidenhead, but their inquiries elicited nothing further. They questioned May minutely regarding Gilmore's habits, and learned from her that nearly every afternoon lately he had rowed in his boat alone up the river.

"Did he go on the 29th of April?" they asked.

"No; but he did the day before—on the 28th," she answered.

"Entirely alone?"

"As far as I know, yes."

"What time did he return on the 28th?"

"About half-past seven—in time for dinner."

"And he lived here?" asked one of the detectives, looking curiously at the pretty, though grief-stricken, young woman before him.

"Generally—not always," answered May, with a sudden blush.

But she could tell them nothing but what she had already told Mr. Whitmore. She knew of no acquaintances that he had in Maidenhead she said, as the friends he had to visit him always came down from London. Then they went to the boathouse, where Gilmore's two boats were kept. The man in charge of the boats entirely confirmed May's account regarding Lord Gilmore going out to row alone nearly every afternoon lately. He used to start about half-past three o'clock, the boatkeeper said, and generally was back by seven. He did not go on the 29th of April.

"Were the boats ever out that day at all?"

"No, sir, never," replied the man.

"Could Lord Gilmore have gone without your knowledge?"

"No, he could not; I always keep the key of the boathouse, and go up each morning to the Rookery to get his lordship's orders."

The detectives then decided to row up the river and inquire at the various villages, and locks, if anything was known of the missing lord. Several people up to a certain point in the river knew a young hunchbacked man by sight, who generally was alone in his boat, and also generally wore a light blue cloth cap. But there was nothing to explain, or account, for his mysterious disappearance, especially as he had been seen since he could possibly have been on the river.

But as Mr. Whitmore and the detectives were rowing down the river after their vain inquiries, one of them pointed out the little riverside villa where Madame de Costa dwelt.

"That Spanish-looking fellow was sitting fishing there

when we went up," said the detective, "and there he is fishing still—suppose we row in and ask him if he knows the hunchback lord by sight?"

They followed this suggestion, and a few minutes later rowed up to the stockade where Juan was sitting fishing, rod in hand, with his mandoline lying on one of the props of the stockade beside him.

Juan smiled politely as they approached, laid down his rod, and went to the landing stage to receive them.

They addressed him in English, but Juan only shook his head, grinned out of his white teeth, and gave them to understand that he knew no English. Then Mr. Whitmore tried him with French, but again Juan shook his head, and began to tell them volubly in Spanish that that language was his native and only tongue.

Neither Mr. Whitmore nor the detectives understood Spanish, and therefore it seemed hopeless to further question Juan; but Mr. Whitmore smilingly pointed to Juan's mandoline, and the black-browed, swarthy rogue instantly accepted this as an invitation to perform before them.

He took up his poetic-looking instrument, to which long and varied colored narrow ribbons of deep, rich hues were attached, and having flung the ribbons over his shoulder, began to troll forth in his full, melodious voice some love ditty of his romantic land.

His song was well worth listening to, and the whole appearance of the man was so picturesque and striking that Mr. Whitmore considered the performance quite worth the shilling which he flung at Juan's feet, who, picking it up, grinned, took off his tall pointed hat, and seemed perfectly satisfied with the impression he had made.

"He's a fine-looking fellow," said Whitmore as they rowed again into the open, "but he looks a bit of a scamp; I wonder who he belongs to?"

"Probably to some Spanish merchant who is settled in town," answered one of the detectives; "these people take these small places down the river for the summer months."

"Most likely," answered Whitmore carelessly, and then the subject was dropped; and the little riverside villa where Gerard Lord Gilmore had sat so often of late soon faded from their view.

And all their researches and inquiries proved as vain as this row up the river. Hundreds of people knew Lord

Gilmore by sight, but no one knew anything about his movements on the 29th of April, the day he disappeared, except Mrs. May and the servants of the Rookery, and the station-master. Nothing would shake the station-master in the statement which he had made, that he had seen and spoken to Lord Gilmore on the evening of the 29th of April, at a few minutes before eleven o'clock, and that he had seen him enter the train.

"If he left in the train, then it is no use looking for him at Maidenhead," the detectives decided, and therefore quitted the place, and a search along the whole line of railway from Maidenhead to town was at once instituted.

In the meanwhile poor May, unable any longer to endure the misery of her position, turned in her loneliness and wretchedness to the father whom she had forsaken. To the intense surprise of John Sumners, therefore, about a fortnight after the disappearance of Gilmore, the rural postman one morning delivered at his house a letter in his daughter's handwriting.

John's rugged brown face flushed scarlet the moment his eyes fell upon it, and then he drew out his horn spectacles, and having with trembling hands adjusted them, began to read the piteous, heart-broken words.

"My dearest father,—Perhaps you will be too angry with me to read this, yet if you knew all the misery and trouble I am in, I think you would not be. I know I behaved very badly in leaving you as I did, but Gerard—my poor, poor Gerard—gave me no choice. We were engaged to be married when Gerard left Scarley, and when he became Lord Gilmore, he wrote to me to meet him in secret, and said he would keep his promise and marry me, but that our marriage must be kept a secret from everyone for the present. I prayed very hard to tell you, but he would not consent, and at last I gave in. We were married in London at a church all right, and then at another church because Gerard had been brought up a Roman Catholic. I loved him very dearly, dear father, and we were happy, though I fretted about you, and about people not knowing that we were married. But the dreadful part of my news is yet to come. A fortnight ago—on the 29th of April—Gerard told me he was going up to London to a dance which a bachelor friend of his intended

to give on that night. I forgot to tell you that he has bought a house for me down here, and that he generally lives here, but he has rooms in London where he stays when he goes there. Dear father, he started in time to go to this dance, and I have never seen or heard of him again! All sorts of cruel things are said about his disappearance, because people do not know that we are really married, and some think he has just run away and left me. But I do not think this, because he has a good heart—I think something dreadful has happened to him, and I am in utter misery about him. Dear father, will you forgive me and come to me in my great, great trouble? I will not write any more for I am broken down with grief; but hoping soon to hear from you and see you.—I remain your affectionate daughter,

“MAY.”

John Sumners read this sorrowful letter twice, and then sank down on his knees in solemn heartfelt prayer. It had been more bitter than death to him, the thought that his child was living a life of shame, and the knowledge of her marriage swept a great black cloud from his soul. Long he knelt there, pouring forth in untutored language his thankfulness and gratitude; praying as he had sometimes prayed when in great danger on the deep; when the mighty waves had opened as if to swallow him and his small craft, and yet He who made the sea and the wonders thereof had brought him safe to shore.

When presently he rose from his knees and began to set his house in order, like a man going on a long journey; settling all his accounts, and drawing five hundred pounds from his bank, so as to have funds in hand to help his daughter. And having made all these arrangements he left Scarley without a word of farewell or boasting. He knew very well what had been said about May, but it was not the idle gossip that had cut him to the soul. He was a God-fearing man, with his face turned heavenwards, and the thought that his prayers had been answered, that his child had been given back to him, was too solemn for vain words.

And two days later poor, unhappy May, who was beginning to receive cold looks from those around her—from those who had eaten her bread and belonged to her household, because it was believed that the young lord who

had protected her was either dead or had fled from her—two days later, then, after she had written to her father, as she sat sad and silent in one of the rooms which opened from the hall, she heard the door bell ring, and ever eagerly looking out for news she sprang to her feet and listened.

And she heard a familiar voice—the voice of her father—and the next moment had rushed into the hall, and clasped him tightly in her arms.

“Father! Father!” she cried, with her cheek against his rugged one.

John Sumners was a man of few words, and for a minute or two he did not speak, though his lips quivered as if about to do so. Then with his deep voice, broken with emotion, he said solemnly:

“Thank God, my girl, thank God, I have found thee safe.”

CHAPTER XLI.

A HAUNTING SHADOW.

AGAIN we must turn to the night of the 29th April, when, in the darkness and the storm, Lord Gilmore disappeared, and was seen no more. The morning after this night, Nancy rose pale, oppressed, and with the shadow of coming ill lying heavy on her heart. She was afraid to face her husband—to go into Hugh Gifford’s dressing-room, after the terrible words she had heard him mutter in his sleep; and after seeing the terrible expression of his face as he stole into his room in the midnight hours.

The nurse came for the child and she went down to breakfast, and after waiting till past ten o’clock, she at last reluctantly, slowly, went upstairs again, and passing through her own room rapped at Hugh Gifford’s door.

Hearing something like a permission to enter, she went in, only to start back shocked and terrified. Hugh Gifford was in bed, and his face looked haggard and even ghastly, and he had evidently been drinking heavily.

“Are you ill, Hugh?” faltered Nancy.

“Ill!” he answered, with a drunken laugh, “I’ve got brain fever—brain fever—feel how it burns—it’s coals on fire!”

"Shall I bathe it for you?" asked Nancy, trembling.

"No, but reach the brandy—that's a good girl; there's nothing like drink; it drowns, it drowns everything."

"Oh! don't take any more, Hugh," she prayed.

"Give me it; I insist!" he shouted, starting up; but when Nancy went to the bottle of brandy which had been standing in his room she found it was empty.

But he ordered her to ring the bell for another bottle, and went on drinking all day, and by night was in a raging fever. But the pale young wife who tried to control him allowed no one else to enter his room, and dare not send for a physician. Strange words broke from his lips; a haunting shadow of horror seemed ever to pursue him; and again and again Nancy listened with a sinking heart to the words she had heard last night.

"Don't do it unless you are sure he is dead; don't put him in alive!"

All night Nancy sat up with him, and towards morning he grew very prostrate. He then became a little calmer, and at last fell into a heavy sleep, from which he awoke about eleven o'clock the next day—pale, exhausted, and very ill; but sober. He lay still without speaking for some time, and Nancy noticed that his eyes fell when they met hers, and that he moved uneasily. Presently he said:

"I've made a tremendous fool of myself, I am afraid, Nancy; but some men gave a swell dinner at the club and I drank far more than was good for me, and have been very near brain fever or *delirium tremens*, I believe—and I daresay have been going on in a very absurd way."

"But you are better now, Hugh," answered Nancy, soothingly.

"I feel bad enough, I can tell you; I hope you did not let anyone else see me make an ass of myself?"

"I have been with you all the time, Hugh—no one else."

"That's all right, then; now I'll try to get to sleep again."

But he did not easily recover, and was in bed more than a week after the stormy night of the 29th of April, when he had returned home in such a terrible state. All this time Nancy nursed him, and gave out in the household that he was laid up with a very severe cold, and that he could not bear to be disturbed. He asked for the newspapers

and his letters, and one morning before he was awake, Nancy having carried up the morning papers for him, sat down to read one of them until he roused himself and was ready for his breakfast.

And she had not read long before a paragraph caught her eyes, which, as she read and re-read it, seemed absolutely to swim before her.

It was headed "The Missing Lord," and detailed the strange facts that we already know. How Lord Gilmore had mysteriously disappeared, and had been last seen by the station-master, at Maidenhead, at five minutes before eleven o'clock, on the night of the 29th of April.

The 29th of April! Nancy gasped for breath, and mentally counted back the last seven days. As she did so a sharp physical pain darted through her heart, and she had the greatest difficulty in restraining the cry that nearly escaped her whitening lips. That was the night Hugh returned in the midnight hours with the fixed look of horror on his face; the night when he had begun to drink—what could it all mean?

She grew faint and cold, and grasped the chair on which she was sitting for support. No one knew as well as she did how Hugh Gifford had hated his elder brother with a deadly hatred that never grew less. She had indeed ceased to mention the elder brother's name, as she saw it was but a vain thing to attempt to reconcile them. And that he should have disappeared—Gerard—filled Nancy's heart with the direst apprehension.

Presently she rose and tottered from the room, giving one look of fear, of terror, at the face of the sleeping man lying on the bed, as she went out. She was quite overcome, and going into her pretty drawing-room, the door of which happened to be open as she passed it, she sat down there, and covered her face with her hands.

Long she sat, the most terrible thoughts crowding through her mind. Then a kind of piteous cry burst from her quivering lips.

"For baby's sake—for baby's sake," she repeated, rocking herself to and fro. Yes, for the child's sake, she was telling herself, she must hide in her own heart the haunting shadow that ever after would pursue her footsteps. She must keep her fears hidden from Hugh, from everyone. If Gerard were dead Hugh would be again Lord Gilmore—and Nancy shuddered at the thought.

About half-an-hour later she heard Hugh's bell ring, and trembling still in every limb she crept upstairs and found him sitting up in bed, reading the very paper which had caused her this terrible shock.

"Well," he said, as she entered the room, "there's some news about our family in this paper, I see—my worthy elder brother has run away!"

He spoke in a bitter, mocking tone, and it seemed impossible to Nancy to answer him; and Hugh Gifford looking suddenly and suspiciously at her saw the pallor of her face.

"Have you seen it?" he asked quickly.

"I saw Gilmore was missing," answered Nancy with difficulty.

Hugh Gifford gave a harsh, forced laugh.

"Missing with some lady-love, no doubt!" he said, scornfully. "I heard there was a girl he lived with down the river somewhere; no doubt he has got tired of her and has run away—he'll cast up."

Nancy said nothing more. She moved about the room and rang for Hugh's breakfast, and she thought by the face of the man-servant who carried it in, that he had heard the news too. It had already, indeed, been discussed downstairs and freely commented on. If Gerard, Lord Gilmore, were dead, then Hugh Gifford was the next heir, they all said, and they respected the next heir accordingly.

There were many versions of course of the same story, but the most generally received one was that the unfortunate young hunchbacked lord had been intoxicated when he entered the train, and been murdered for his money while in a state of semi-insensibility. What had become of his body no one could tell, but the whole line of railway was being searched, and it was proposed to offer a large reward for its recovery.

It naturally was greatly talked of. Hugh Gifford had of course been well known in society as Lord Gilmore, and the strange events which had deprived him of the title were also well known. It was strange if it should so soon go back to him, people said; therefore the efforts of the police were followed with the keenest interest. Only Hugh Gifford affected utter indifference about it, and would shrug his shoulders when it was mentioned to him.

"He will cast up, you will see," he said, when he reappeared after his illness at his clubs, and some of his friends began talking to him of his brother's strange disappearance; and he said the same to Nancy at home; the same to his mother when, some rumor having reached her ears about her eldest son, Lady Gilmore wrote to Hugh to make inquiries.

But during all these days the most miserable anxiety hung over Nancy's heart, and told so visibly on her appearance, that when her old friend Major Erne called one afternoon to see her, he felt absolutely shocked. She was pale with violet rims around her heavy eyes, in which there was a strange new look of fear.

"Have you been ill?" asked Erne with real concern.

"I've not been feeling very well; I get nervous headaches," answered Nancy without looking at his face.

"I am so sorry; you ought to go down and stay with Miss Gifford for change at Gateford. She told me that I was to be sure to call on you, and also to be sure to ask to see your little son."

"Poor little baby!" said Nancy, with tremulous lips.

"Rich little baby! I think," smiled Erne.

Nancy sighed, and Erne could not understand how even the baby now failed apparently to make Nancy's heart more light.

"And this story about your brother-in-law," he said presently. "How much of it is true?" And he noticed that Nancy grew paler as he spoke.

"I know nothing but what I have seen in the papers," she answered. "My—husband was ill at the time when Lord Gilmore is said to have disappeared, and I was nursing him, and we heard nothing of it for days—Hugh says he is sure to cast up again."

"Yet the police think very seriously of the case, I believe."

"It certainly does seem most strange. What does Miss Gifford think about it?"

"Oh, Miss Gifford thinks perhaps it is only a freak—that Lord Gilmore has perhaps run away with someone."

"Well, we shall know soon, I suppose," said Nancy nervously.

"Time clears up most of things," answered Erne. "But you must let me see her boy, as Miss Gifford calls your son, or I dare not face the old lady."

Nancy smiled and went out of the room to fetch her baby, and returned with him in her arms. A handsome little fellow this, who put out his small hand and grasped one of Major Erne's brown fingers, who stooped down and kissed the little fist.

"He looks remarkably well; he is certainly a lucky little chappie," said Erne smiling.

"Who knows," answered Nancy. "Who can tell?" And she sighed, and then tenderly kissed the baby's face.

They were still talking of him, when another visitor was announced, and to Nancy's great surprise Father Hayward was ushered into the drawing-room.

The good priest looked very serious, and having shaken hands with Nancy and Major Erne, he asked Nancy if her husband was in the house.

"I have some strange news for him," he said gravely.

"Not about—Gerard?" asked Nancy, with unmistakable agitation.

"Yes, about Lord Gilmore," answered Father Hayward.

"Have—they found him, then?" almost gasped Nancy.

The priest shook his head.

"Unhappily not—but can I see Mr. Gifford?"

With trembling hands Nancy rang the bell, and inquired of the servant if her husband was at home.

The footman thought not, but went to see, and a few moments later returned to the drawing-room, and said Mr. Gifford was out.

"Then can I speak to you?" said the priest.

"Yes—of course," faltered Nancy.

Upon this Major Erne took his leave, and the nurse was sent for to take the baby; and Nancy found herself alone with Father Hayward.

"We had a strange visitor at Wrothsley yesterday," he began. "But will you not sit down, Mrs. Gifford? You have grown so pale."

Then Nancy sat down, and with a white face and beating heart listened to the priest's news.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FATHER HAYWARD'S NEWS.

"I was telling you," repeated Father Hayward, "that we had a strange visitor yesterday at Wrothsley, but happily I met him just at the entrance of the Castle, and was able to prevent him having an interview with Lady Gilmore; but his communication to me was such an important one that I lost no time in coming to town to test its truth."

"Important!" repeated Nancy, who could scarcely restrain her agitation.

"Most important—but I must tell you about our strange visitor. Well, just as I was about to enter the Castle, I perceived a seafaring looking man standing talking to one of the footmen in a very earnest fashion. I was just about to pass the two and go into the library, which room, as you know, is always open to me, when Graham, the footman, addressed me."

"‘Your reverence,’ he said, ‘this person insists on seeing her ladyship, but I tell him it is impossible, so perhaps you would kindly persuade him to go?’"

"Then I turned to the seafaring looking man, who was of rugged, but honest countenance."

"‘It is impossible for you to see Lady Gilmore,’ I said, ‘but if you have any message for her ladyship I can carry it to her.’"

"The man answered determinedly—"

"‘I must see Lady Gilmore,’ he said, ‘it is a matter of life and death, and relates to her eldest son.’"

"‘You mean Lord Gilmore?’ I asked now, greatly interested, as I thought perhaps this person could give us some clue as to his disappearance."

"‘They call him Lord Gilmore now,’ answered the man, ‘but I have known him by another name.’"

"‘Come into the library and talk to me,’ I said, and I led the way thither, and the man followed me. When we got there, and I had shut the door, I told him he could as safely confide in me any communication he

had to make as to Lady Gilmore herself, as I was her priest and confessor, and intimately acquainted with the whole family circumstances.

“He hesitated a moment, looked me keenly in the face, with a pair of clear, honest blue eyes, and then began his story, which I will try to relate as nearly in his own words as I can.

“‘I am called John Sumners,’ he said, ‘and I am a boatbuilder at a village called Scarley.’

“‘Scarley?’ I interrupted, for I had been to Scarley.

“‘Aye,’ he answered, ‘Scarley, where the lad who was called Gerard Brewster was reared, and this lad was my daughter’s sweetheart. Sir,’ he went on, with strange energy and passion, ‘I cursed that lad the last time I saw him, for I believed he’d wronged my girl! They were engaged to be wedded, it seems, when he left Scarley, and came to this place, and they made him a grand lord. But I have naught to do with that; what I have to do with is my girl.’

“‘Then you know nothing of Lord Gilmore’s disappearance?’ I asked.

“‘Wait a bit, I am coming to that,’ he answered. ‘Well, some months back my girl disappeared,’ he continued; ‘I parted with her one night, and in the morning she was gone, and I was like a man demented for many a day. She’s my only one, sir, and a better lass never lived, and I could believe no ill of her. Yet folks began to say that she’d gone off with Gerard Brewster, because they had made him into a lord, and that he was too grand to wed my girl, and that she was his light-o’-love.’

“‘Was this so, then?’ I inquired.

“‘I will tell you directly, sir; I went up to London and taxed him with wronging my girl, face to face, and he denied it. I offered never to see her again if he would wed her, and told him I would settle my bit of money on her, but he still denied he knew anything about her, though I saw he was lying by his face. And though I tried hard to see him again I could not—they said he had gone abroad—so I just went back home, with my heart well-nigh broken o’ thinking of the poor lass—and until three days ago I heard nothing more.’

“‘Then you have heard from her?’ I said.

“‘Heard from her, and seen her, both; I got a letter

from her to tell me that she was in sore distress—that she was wed to Gerard Brewster, Lord Gilmore, now——’

“ ‘Married !’ I exclaimed.

“ ‘Aye, married as fast as the church could make her, for Gerard had kept his word to her, and they were wedded in two churches to make it sure, on the very day she went to him. But the lad has disappeared, and his poor young wife is in bitter distress, for there’s a baby coming, and I thought it but right to come and tell his mother the whole story, so that something more might be done to find him.’

“ ‘These were the man’s very words, Mrs. Gifford,’ continued Father Hayward, “and it was with difficulty I could persuade him to delay his communication to Lady Gilmore, on account of the delicate state of her health, and the danger of any sudden shock. I told him I would see him again to-day, and I have ascertained in the meanwhile that it is perfectly true that his daughter is Lord Gilmore’s legal wife ; and I called to tell her husband this news, and also to say that the time has now come, I think, when the family should offer a large reward for any authentic clue of Lord Gilmore’s mysterious disappearance.”

Nancy had listened to the good priest’s words with breathless interest, down-cast eyes, and a fast beating heart. Then, as he paused, she suddenly looked up.

“And what do you think about it?” she said quickly. “My husband always says he is sure to be heard of soon—I mean Gerard?”

“And what reason has he for thinking so?” asked the priest, quietly.

“Oh, he knows nothing—he only saw about it in the newspapers, you know,” continued Nancy, yet more hastily. “He was ill in bed when it happened—we read about it when he was in bed.”

“They have never become friends, have they?”

“Never! Hugh has never seen him, nor spoken to him since that unfortunate quarrel they had at Wrothsley. Poor Gerard, I most earnestly trust nothing has happened to him—and what misery for his poor young wife!”

“By her father’s account she is in the most bitter distress, and I mean to go down to see her at Maidenhead, to-day, and hear from her own lips all the details of

Lord Gilmore's disappearance. Her father seems an honest, straightforward working man—but it's a sad thing, Mrs. Gifford, such a marriage as this—it seems as though the evil springing from Lady Gilmore's fatal error would never end."

"It has brought great, great trouble certainly," answered Nancy, with quivering lips.

She was thinking how it had changed Hugh Gifford; how the light-hearted, careless man had become morose, gloomy and dissatisfied; and now the news of his elder brother's marriage was sure still further to embitter him.

"Will you then tell your husband what I have said," added Father Hayward, rising; "I shall now go down to Maidenhead, and see the new Lady Gilmore, and hear everything she has got to say, and then to-morrow I should like to call again here, and consult with Mr. Gifford what would be the best steps to take under the circumstances?"

"I will tell Hugh," said Nancy with some hesitation.

"Please do; I will call here to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, and will you kindly ask Mr. Gifford to see me then?"

Nancy promised that she would do so, and then she asked after Lady Gilmore, and the children at Wrothsley.

"Lady Gilmore is better, but still very frail, and I absolutely dread the effect of this news upon her. She misses you very much, and is always talking of the time when you and your little son will return to Wrothsley. You will come to her, will you not, if any fresh trouble falls?"

"Yes," said Nancy in a low tone; for it seemed to her that moment that fresh trouble was very near.

Then after a few further words Father Hayward went away, and Nancy stood thinking of the task which lay before her. She had to tell her husband of her brother's marriage with a girl of lowly birth; to tell him that probably the last chance had passed away, that his own son would never inherit the title, for Hugh Gifford had always persisted that Gerard would never marry. And it was therefore with absolute dread that late in the afternoon—only just in time to dress for dinner—Nancy heard Hugh Gifford go into his dressing-room, and a minute later with trembling fingers, she rapped at the door.

"Come in," he called, and Nancy went in, and Hugh looked around and nodded as she did so,

"Well, Nancy, any news?" he said carelessly.

"I have got some news, Hugh," she answered in a low tone.

"I hope it's good then, or I don't want to hear it."

"It's something very strange—Father Hayward has been here, Hugh—"

"Nothing about my mother, I hope?"

"No, but yesterday a man went to Wrothsley, a sort of a seafaring man, and he asked to see Lady Gilmore, insisted upon seeing her, but luckily Father Hayward arrived at the Castle just then, and the footman appealed to him—and then this man said he wanted to see Lady Gilmore about something concerning her—eldest son."

Hugh Gifford turned his head away sharply.

"What have I to do with this?" he asked in a changed voice.

"Then Father Hayward took this man into the library," continued Nancy in faltering accents, "and—he told Father Hayward a strange story, Hugh—where your brother was brought up, somewhere on the northern sea-coast, this man and his daughter lived, and—Gerard was engaged to be married to this girl—when all the changes came, when he became Lord Gilmore, you know."

A sort of exclamation here broke from Hugh Gifford's lips.

"I don't like to tell you all this, Hugh," went on poor Nancy, "but I am obliged to do it, because Father Hayward wishes to see you about it——"

"I won't see him!" interrupted Hugh Gifford, hoarsely.

"Oh! do Hugh—he would think it so strange if you do not—because this man went on to tell Father Hayward, that one day his daughter disappeared from home, and he never heard of her or from her for months. People said she had gone to Gerard, and her father saw Gerard in town, but he denied he knew anything of her. And her father heard nothing more till a few days ago—after Gerard had disappeared for a fortnight—and then the daughter wrote to her father to tell him of her distress—and to tell him, too, that she was married to Gerard——"

"What!" said Hugh Gifford, so darkly, so passionately, that Nancy absolutely trembled.

"They are really married," she went on after a

moment's pause. "Father Hayward ascertained this was so before he came here, and he thought that you should know—for, Hugh, a baby is coming——"

An inarticulate cry of absolute fury now burst from Hugh Gifford's quivering lips.

"It's a lie, nothing but a lie!" he almost shouted, his face pale with passion the while; "this is another trick of the priest's to rob me again of what always should have been mine. He has bribed this woman, no doubt—now when——"

Suddenly he paused; suddenly turned away his head, and half-staggered across the room, as if utterly overcome.

"Oh! Hugh—" said Nancy appealingly, and she went up to him and would have put her hand on his shoulder, but he shrank away from her.

"Don't, don't touch me," he said hoarsely. "Is this true, absolutely true, that you have been telling me?" he added turning round and facing her. "Did the priest say this?"

"Yes, it is true," faltered Nancy.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Yes—he said he thought the time had now come when the family should offer a reward for any clue to—your brother's disappearance—and he wished to see you about this."

"I won't see him, once for all!"

Nancy was silent, indeed she was afraid to speak.

"And moreover," went on Hugh Gifford looking at his watch. "I am not going to dine here to-day—I am going out of town, and when the priest calls to-morrow, you can tell him I am not at home."

Still Nancy was silent; she stood there before him with her eyes cast down, and with a dull, cold pain in her heart.

"What have I to do with all this?" continued Hugh Gifford loudly and excitedly. "Let them offer what rewards they like, but I won't move a finger in the matter."

"But—is it wise, Hugh?" said Nancy, tremblingly.

Again a sudden change passed over his face—a look almost of fear—but it was only momentary.

"What do you mean?" he said roughly enough; "what want of wisdom is there in have nothing to do with their offers?"

“I only meant——”

“Well, I have no time just now to listen to what you meant. Will you kindly ring the bell, and tell Charles I want a hansom to be here in five minutes—and now I have a letter to write.”

Nancy saw that he meant her to go away, and so she left him with a sinking heart. He looked into the drawing-room for a moment before he left the house, and told Nancy that “if the priest called,” she was to tell Father Hayward from him, that he preferred to have “nothing to do with the affair at all.”

“Let them manage it their own way,” he added. “Good-bye, Nancy; I’ll reappear when I think the coast is clear of the priest,” and he nodded his head, and was gone—without saying a word where he was going!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FORSAKEN.

FATHER HAYWARD arrived the next morning at eleven o’clock, as he had arranged, and looked very grave indeed when Nancy was forced to tell him that her husband was not at home.

“That is most unfortunate,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” answered Nancy, trying to hide Hugh Gifford’s seeming discourtesy, “he had made an engagement to go out of town, which he could not put off—but he told me to tell you, Father Hayward, he would prefer to have nothing to do with this affair—about his brother.

“Do you mean about offering a reward for any clue to throw light on Lord Gilmore’s strange disappearance?”

“Yes; he said he should rather not move in the matter at all—you see they were not friends.”

“Still I think it a great pity, a very great pity, considering the circumstances, that Mr. Gifford should not come forward in this matter. You see if anything has happened to Lord Gilmore, Mr. Gifford is at the present moment his presumptive heir, unless his child should be born alive and a son.”

“And the wife?” said Nancy, wishing to change the conversation. “Did you see her, and what is she like?”

"She is a pretty, fair, modest-looking young woman, and seems in great distress about the disappearance of her husband—she fears he has been murdered."

"Oh, how terrible!"

"The mysterious part of it is that someone must be withholding information from the police, as he left the house two hours before he was seen at the station, at Maidenhead, by the station-master, who seems an intelligent man, and positively states he saw Lord Gilmore start in the eleven train for town. Now during these two hours he must have been in some house, as the night, they tell me, was wet and stormy, yet no one has come forward to tell where he was; and this is one reason why I am so anxious that a large reward should be offered, as it might be an inducement to some person to speak the truth."

"It is most extraordinary," said Nancy, casting down her eyes.

"It is a grievous thing, grievous for the poor young wife, and for the whole family, and what its effects on Lady Gilmore may be I dread to think of, and desire to keep it from her knowledge as long as possible. And this is why I so earnestly wish that your husband would come forward."

Nancy shook her head.

"I fear that it will be in vain to ask him, Father Hayward," she said.

"Could you not try to persuade him?"

"I do not think I could."

"In that case I must act on my own responsibility, and on that of young Lady Gilmore, and her father, Mr. Sumners; for there is no doubt that the affair is most serious, and that no exertion should be spared to elucidate the strange disappearance of this young man."

He took his leave shortly after this, and Nancy remained in the house all day, expecting her husband's return. But Hugh Gifford did not reappear until night-fall, and told Nancy casually that he had been down the river to Cookham.

"A man I know is staying at the hotel there, so I went to get out of the way of the priest," he said. "Did he come, and what did he say?"

Then Nancy explained and told him what Father Hayward had said, and Hugh Gifford listened with a moody brow.

"As I said before, let them manage it themselves," he said sullenly; "if this woman is his wife, she is the proper person to do it;" and then he changed the conversation.

But Nancy noticed that during the next few days he was more restless and unsettled than ever. She saw, too, how often his eyes would rest on her face with a pained, sad look in them, and he was more considerate, and more gentle in his manner to her—more as he used to be after her accident, and during her long illness—and he grew fonder than ever of the child.

A large reward had been offered in the meanwhile for any information regarding the disappearance of Gerard, Lord Gilmore, but Hugh Gifford said nothing of this to Nancy for nearly a week after Father Hayward's last visit. Then suddenly, one morning, he told her he was going abroad for a while.

"All this affair has worried me so that I want a change," he said. "People are always bothering me at the clubs to know if anything has been discovered, and one fellow had the impudence to call me Lord Gilmore again yesterday, and so I am about sick of it, Nancy, and am going away."

"You will take me with you, then?" said Nancy, looking up with her dark eyes on his changing face.

"No, no, I cannot; what could I do with a nurse and a baby dragging after me, and you could not leave the child?"

"I could take him to your mother's or Miss Gifford's," answered Nancy, though the thought of parting from her baby was very terrible to her.

"Yes, and be pining after him the whole time. No, you stay at home, and look after the child—poor little woman."

He laid his hand kindly on her shoulder, as he spoke, and looked almost wistfully in her face.

"I am afraid I have been a bad husband to you, Nancy," he said. "God knows I did not mean to be—that I was very fond of you—but with one thing and another."

"And have you quite changed to me, Hugh?"

"I am a changed man altogether, I think—it seems to me that we never know what we shall do—that we are driven hither and thither, by fate, that is too powerful for us—it has been so with me at least."

He spoke these disjointed words as if his mind were dwelling on something; as if they fell from his lips almost without thought.

"But it's no good regretting the past," he added, as if trying to rouse himself from his abstraction. "I believe you are a good little woman, worthy of a better fate than you've got—and yet we have had some happy days, haven't we?"

"Oh! yes, yes, Hugh!" said Nancy, her eyes filling with sudden tears, "very happy days—and I pray we may have many more."

He gave a restless sigh, and then stooped down and kissed her cheek and a moment later turned away. And she scarcely saw him again during the day, as he was engaged, he told her, arranging some business before he left England.

"But you won't stay long?" she asked.

"Oh, no, but still there are things to be seen about," he answered, and the next morning he told her he was going to start.

"And you won't see your mother first then?"

"No, no, I could not stand it—but for her—"

Here he abruptly broke off his sentence, and Nancy asked no more questions. Then when the hour for his departure drew near, he told her to bring the boy to his dressing-room, and when she complied with his wish, he took the child in his arms and kissed him tenderly.

"Good-bye, little fellow," he said, and for a moment his hazel eyes grew dim; "be good always to your mother—better than your father has been."

"But Hugh—Hugh, why do you speak like that—as if you were going away for so long?" said Nancy with agitation.

"Nonsense. I was only giving the youngster good advice," he answered, trying to speak lightly, though his lips quivered. "Well, Nancy, here is your boy again—I need not tell you to take good care of him—and take care of yourself."

"Yes; but I wish you would not go, Hugh."

He made no answer, but he stooped down and kissed her twice.

"Poor little woman," she heard him mutter. "I will write," he added, and then he wrung her hand, looked for one moment in her face, and the next had hurried

away ; and two minutes later was driven from the house.

And a great depression fell on Nancy's heart after he was gone. His manner had been so strange, and the whole circumstances connected with his brother's disappearance were so mysterious, that Nancy dare not even to herself admit her secret dread. Mrs. Loftus saw very well that something was weighing heavily on her daughter's mind, though she was too wise to try to force herself into her confidence.

No letter came from Hugh Gifford for nearly a week after his departure, and at the end of this time, Major Erne, who was still in town, one day again called on Nancy, and once more noticed how ill and anxious she was looking.

"What message have I to carry to Miss Gifford," he asked smiling. "I leave town the day after to-morrow, and she will expect to hear some news of you and her little heir."

"You must tell her baby is very well."

"And you?"

"Oh, I am fairly well too."

"You do not look so then ; you must forgive an old friend for saying this, but really I cannot give a good account of you."

"Perhaps I want change," said Nancy uneasily.

"You want something, I am sure ; why not go to Miss Gifford's as I suggested to you before?"

At this moment the footman brought in a letter, which had just arrived by post, and as Nancy glanced at the address, she saw it was from Hugh Gifford, and was the first letter she had received since he went abroad.

"This is from Mr. Gifford," she said ; "he is away, you know."

"I did not know," answered Erne, rising restlessly ; but don't mind me, I will look out of the window while you read your letter."

He went to one of the windows of the room as he spoke, and stood there gazing vaguely out. Suddenly he heard a sort of exclamation from Nancy, and turning quickly round, saw her standing, quite pale, and staring at the letter in her hand as if she did not understand its meaning.

"I hope you have got no ill news?" he said.

"I—I—do not know—I cannot understand," she faltered out.

He crossed the room and went up to her, and as he did this the letter fluttered from Nancy's nerveless hand and fell upon the floor, and Erne stooped down and lifted it up.

"What is the matter?" he said kindly, as he laid the letter on a table near.

"I—I—cannot tell," said Nancy in a broken voice, "and yet, oh! Godfrey—you are an old friend—tell me what I must do?"

She put out her hand as if appealing for help, and Godfrey Erne took it.

"If I can help you in any way," he said earnestly, "please let me do so."

"It is from Hugh—my husband—to tell me, that he has left me," went on poor Nancy still in a broken voice, "to tell me that he has gone."

"What! Do you mean for good?"

"Yes, that is what he says—that he will never come back."

"Impossible! surely you are mistaken? Had you any quarrel?"

"No, none, none! it is not that."

Again she put her trembling hand out for the letter, and re-read it, and then gave it to Godfrey Erne.

"You can read it, and tell me what you think," she said.

Then Erne read the letter, and his face grew very stern as he did so, and his gray eyes flashed. It was as follows—a strange letter indeed to be penned by a young husband to a young wife, and whom he had parted from so lately with a tender kiss.

"Nancy. For no more can I write my Nancy, since this letter must end our brief married life—and henceforth we must be as strangers. I write this with pain, because I shrink from giving you pain, and because you have deserved nothing but good from my hands. But we never should have married. Years before I saw you, I was bound by honor to another woman; to a woman who had sacrificed much for my sake, and only loved me too well. To this woman I have now returned, and from this step there is no going back. For yourself I have arranged that you shall be amply provided for, with an allowance also for the rearing of the boy, as I do not choose him to be entirely

dependent on Miss Gifford; and I should advise you—if I may still advise—to go to Wrothsley to live with my mother. But, if you prefer to keep on your own house, the rent will be regularly paid by my lawyer, and in that case, it would be well to have your mother with you. Remember, I only am to blame for this, *not you*. I was led away by your beauty and sweetness, to do what I had no right to do, and I bitterly regret having brought all this trouble upon you. But you will be happier without me, Nancy, and you have your boy, and you must try to bring him up to be a better man than his father.

“HUGH GIFFORD.”

Godfrey Erne read this letter, and then flung it indignantly on the table.

“What does it mean?” asked Nancy, with her eyes fixed on his face.

“It means that he has forsaken you—forsaken you who are so good and pure, for a woman who is not so,” answered Erne, sternly.

“But who can she be? I never heard of any woman—Miss Gifford certainly hinted once——”

“There was a scandal about him when he was Lord Gilmore, I was told; a scandal about some foreign woman who, it was said, shot him first and then shot herself, because he would not fulfil his promise of marrying her—no doubt this is the same.”

“Yes,” said Nancy, and she gave a little shudder; but she was not thinking only that she was forsaken.

“You would like your mother with you, would you not?” Erne said, the next moment. “Let me telegraph for her?”

“I would like her to come—oh! so much—but don’t telegraph, for it might frighten her—would it be a great trouble to you to go for her?”

“It would be no trouble whatever, but I do not like to leave you alone.”

“Why?” asked Nancy, and the color flushed back to her sweet face, and she raised her head a little proudly. “Do you think such a letter as that,” and she pointed to the letter lying on the table, “could break my heart?”

“I hope not, I trust not—I pray you will never break your heart for one so unworthy.”

“No; but if you will go for my mother, Major Erne

—and—and tell her it would spare me some pain and shame—though I know I have no claim to ask this favor of you.”

“No claim!” echoed Erne, and a flush passed over his pale face, and a great throb through his heart. But he crushed back his thoughts—the thoughts of the sweet bright girl he had loved long ago—of the fair woman whose head had lain on his breast in her great peril, and who now stood before him, insulted and forsaken.

“I’ll go at once,” he said, turning away his head with a quick movement to hide his emotion. “I know Mrs. Loftus’ address—I called there this week, though I did not see her—for the present then, good-bye.”

He held out his hand, and clasped Nancy’s for one moment, and was gone. After he left her, Nancy gave one long quivering, shuddering sigh, and stood there with that haunting shadow of her soul creeping still nearer.

“He has gone because he is afraid to stay,” she thought; “this woman is the excuse.”

A little while later, Major Erne reached Mrs. Loftus’ house, in West Hampstead, and to his annoyance, when he was ushered into the little drawing-room, he found another, and substantial lady, seated there as well as the sad-faced widow.

This was no other than “Aunt Fannie” (Mrs. Barclay), who had an approving eye for good-looking young men, and commenced smiling very graciously, after she was introduced to him, on the handsome soldier. This added not a little to Erne’s impatience, and at last he was driven to inquire of Mrs. Loftus if he could speak to her a few moments in private.

“Certainly,” said Mrs. Loftus, rising, while Aunt Fannie’s mottled cheeks grew a dingy red.

“If I am in the way—” she said.

“Oh, no,” answered Major Erne courteously, “but I have a message for Mrs. Loftus—and should like to speak to her a moment alone.”

Upon this Mrs. Loftus led the way to the dining-room, and Major Erne followed her, and, having shut the door, commenced to tell his news.

“I have just left Mrs. Gifford,” he said, casting down his eyes, for it was very painful to him to grieve this woman of many sorrows, “and—she wishes to see you as soon as possible.”

“Nancy ! she’s not ill, is she ?” asked the fond mother in quick alarm.

“No, not ill, but I am sorry to say in great trouble.”

“What is the matter ? Oh ! Major Erne, you are not deceiving me about her health.”

“I swear I am not, but she has had a letter from Mr. Gifford this afternoon—a most extraordinary letter.”

“From her husband ? He is abroad—has anything happened to him ?”

“He has written in very cold hard words to tell Nancy—Mrs. Gifford—that he has forsaken her ; that he has gone to live with another woman.”

A sudden scarlet flush rose on Mrs. Loftus’ delicate skin.

“I—I cannot believe it,” she said with some dignity.

“It is almost impossible to believe it, and yet it is so. Mr. Gifford has written deliberately to tell his wife that he does not mean to return to her, and he has made all arrangements regarding money, and expressed a wish that she should either live with his mother, or that you should live with her.”

“Oh ! this cannot be true !”

“Unfortunately it is too true, Mrs. Loftus ; his conduct is simply disgraceful—and to anyone like——”

He did not finish his sentence ; he bit his lips, and suppressed the words he fain would have spoken, but Mrs. Loftus never noticed his agitation in her own overpowering emotion.

“And did she send you for me ?” she asked, tremulously. “My poor, poor girl !”

“Yes, I happened to be calling on her to bid her good-bye, before I left town, when this disgraceful letter arrived—and she asked me to go for you, and tell you its contents.”

“Oh, my poor Nancy !” said Mrs. Loftus, deeply affected. “I don’t mind telling you, Major Erne, as you are such an old friend, that I have seen for long that she was not happy—and lately she has looked so very ill !”

“She looks ill and worried—but this man, her husband, said in his letter she would be happier without him, and we must hope that she will be.”

“And she wishes me to go to her at once ?”

“Yes, if you can do so, I will take you back in the hansom I came in ; I kept it waiting on purpose.”

"That is her aunt upstairs, Mrs. Barclay—I must say to her Nancy is not very well, and wishes me to go to her—best say nothing more."

"If you like," said Erne, who was always considerate, "I can go and talk to Mrs. Barclay while you make any preparations for leaving home that you may require?"

"Will you? Oh, thank you—just say Nancy is not well, that is all—I shall be ready to go in a few minutes."

Major Erne returned to the drawing-room where Mrs. Barclay was sitting, feeling not a little injured. But as Erne entered she began to smile.

"Well," she said, "and has this mysterious interview with my sister-in-law come to an end?"

Erne smiled also.

"I did not know," he said, "when I asked to see Mrs. Loftus alone, that you were a near relation, or I should have spoken before you. But the truth is, your niece, Mrs. Gifford, is very far from well, and as I was calling there, she asked me to go for her mother, for I am a very old friend of the family you know."

"Not a very *old* friend at all events," answered Mrs. Barclay graciously.

"Yes, I am very old and grayheaded," said Erne, still smiling; "and I have persuaded Mrs. Loftus to drive back with me, for Mrs. Gifford is really not at all well."

"What sort of a man is that husband of hers?" asked Mrs. Barclay curiously.

"I know very little of him," replied Erne, with reserve, and Mrs. Barclay instantly decided in her own mind that he was keeping something back.

But at this moment Mrs. Loftus entered the room, with her bonnet on, and thus put an end to the conversation.

"I am going to see Nancy, Fannie," said Mrs. Loftus, as calmly as she could. "Major Erne says she is not well, and wishes to see me, so will you excuse me for an hour or so?"

"Of course, my dear," answered Mrs. Barclay. "Give my love to Nancy, and tell her I shall call to see her to-morrow."

They thus got quietly away, and Erne took Mrs. Loftus in his hansom cab to Nancy's house, but he did not go in when they arrived there.

"No, I shall call to see how she is to-morrow," he said, as he shook hands with Mrs. Loftus at the door, after he

had handed her out of the cab, for he thought it was kinder and wiser to allow the mother and daughter to meet alone.

Then, as he was returning to his hotel, he purchased a newspaper at one of the underground stations, and as he was glancing carelessly over it, his eyes were suddenly attracted by the heading of a paragraph :

“The Missing Lord—Supposed Clue,” read Erne, naturally with strong interest.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE FIRST CLUE.

THE newspaper paragraph went on to tell that since the reward had been offered for any information concerning the disappearance of Gerard, Lord Gilmore, that a young man named Tyrone, who had been staying at one of the villages up the Thames over six weeks, had come forward and stated that more than once he had seen a young hunchbacked man, whom he knew well by sight, row up to the little landing-place of a small river-side villa, which he could point out.

The police, acting on this information, had gone to this river-side villa, accompanied by Mr. Tyrone, but they had found the villa shut up, and the whole place deserted. They then discovered that this villa belonged to a certain builder in Maidenhead, who had once resided there, but during the last two years, finding it too small for his family, had removed to a larger house and had let this villa to anyone he could get to take it.

The police then had gone to Mr. Gibson, the builder, and the owner of the villa, and this gentleman had been ready to give them any information in his power. A house agent had let the villa in the beginning of March to a foreign lady, named Madame de Costa, who had the place for six months, and paid the rent in advance. But to Mr. Gibson's surprise he had received a communication from the house-agent to tell him that the foreign lady after staying a little over ten weeks at the villa had left it, and had returned the keys to the house agent, who wrote

to ask Mr. Gibson's wishes respecting the future letting of the place.

This was all Mr. Gibson knew about the last tenant, but when the house-agent at Maidenhead was applied to he had more to tell. He stated that Madame de Costa personally took the villa off him, and that she was a tall, dark, and seemingly a very handsome woman, though he never saw her without a veil, and she spoke English very well, though with a slight foreign accent. She had, however, two foreign servants who could not speak a word of English, and these two were the only attendants the house-agent saw when the lady took possession of the villa, having paid six months rent in advance. The house-agent also stated that the lady seemed wealthy, and brought many beautiful things with her; that when she left she returned the keys of the villa to him by parcel post, informing him in a letter she enclosed that the illness of a relation had suddenly recalled her to the south of France.

Erne read all these details, and then a sudden vague suspicion darted across his mind. He further read that the police were most anxious to receive information regarding Madame de Costa. Mr. Tyrone's statement undoubtedly proved that Lord Gilmore had been in the habit of going to the river-side villa during her tenancy, and that this fact might account for where he spent the two hours on the night of the 29th of April, when he left the Rookery in time to catch the nine train, but did not arrive at the station at Maidenhead until a few minutes before eleven o'clock, when he started in the train, which was the last time he had been seen or heard of.

Erne was a man with a clear, acute mind, as well as a strong will, and during the remainder of the evening after he had read this newspaper account of the first clue towards the discovery of "The missing lord," he sat and pondered frequently on the strange mystery that surrounded Lord Gilmore's disappearance. He had meant to leave town the next day, but he did not do this, but telegraphed to General Blenkinsop to tell him he was detained. Then about twelve o'clock the next morning he went to Nancy's house to inquire after her, and was requested by the footman to go in, as Mrs. Gifford had given orders that if he called he was to be admitted.

He was shown into the drawing-room, and a few moments later Nancy entered it. She looked agitated and

ill, and after shaking hands with Erne she at once began to talk on the very subject that Erne had been thinking of so deeply.

"In the papers this morning," she said, nervously, "There is something about Gerard's disappearance—something about some woman he used to visit down the river—have you seen it?"

"Yes," answered Erne, gravely.

"And—and I suppose they will try to trace this woman?" asked Nancy, quickly.

"I suppose so; but it will be very difficult unless she voluntarily comes forward, which is very unlikely."

"Then you think she will have left England?"

"If she has had anything to do with his disappearance no doubt she has."

"His wife knew nothing about this woman, did she?"

"I conclude not, or the fact of his going to this riverside villa would have been mentioned before. But at all events it would seem as though nothing could have happened to him there, as he was last seen at the station at Maidenhead."

Erne's eyes were fixed on Nancy's face as he said this, and in a moment a sudden color flushed over it, which faded as quickly as it came.

"He—might have returned," she said an instant later, as though she were forcing the words from her lips.

"True, he might; the police will, however, probably thoroughly search the villa now, and some trace of him may be discovered. I feel so interested in the case that I think I shall go down to Maidenhead this afternoon; and if I may be allowed I shall come in during the evening and tell you what I see and hear."

"Yes, do—and, Major Erne, there is something I have got to say to you; will you please kindly not mention to anyone that—that Mr. Gifford has forsaken me for—another woman. Let it be said we have quarrelled—anything—but not that."

"If you wish me not to mention it I shall certainly not do so."

"No one knows about that letter—that shameful letter—but my mother and you. My mother will never breathe it, and I feel sure for my sake you will not."

"Without your leave I certainly will not."

"You see it would do no good," went on Nancy, "and

might do harm. For myself I shall never speak to him gain, but that is different—that is between him and me—but for baby's sake I wish no one else to know."

"Then you will not seek to obtain a divorce?" asked Erne, slowly.

"No, oh! no;" and Nancy suddenly put her hand over her face, which grew crimson. "The shame is enough without other people knowing it—I will bear it in silence."

"Few women would do so, but you are the best judge."

"I am sure I am right; I have thought it all over, and I knew I had only to ask you to keep this unhappy secret."

"Ask me what you like and I will do it," said Erne, with deep but suppressed emotion; "and if there is anything I can ever do for you—if, if you should ever want a friend——"

"You have been such a good one to me already," answered Nancy, gently, "that I should always know where to go when I want one in future—we are old friends, are we not?"

She stretched out her hand to him as she spoke, and Erne bent down and kissed it almost reverently. He had a sort of vague idea why Nancy was asking him to keep the secret of her husband's faithlessness, and he thought he understood her unselfishness in doing so.

"She knows more than she will tell," he reflected after he left her; "and she is ready to screen the man who has basely deserted her—and how any man could—" and Erne gave a restless sigh.

Then early in the afternoon he started for Maidenhead, and called on Mr. Gibson, the builder, whose address he easily discovered. He found him a pleasant, rosy-faced man, jovial and well-to-do, and upon Erne telling him he had known the missing lord, and was a friend of the family, Mr. Gibson was quite ready to tell him everything he knew.

"I am going with the police to the little villa in half an hour, sir," he said, "as they want to institute a regular search of the whole place, and if you would like to go with us you are very welcome."

"I should like to do so very much indeed," answered Erne.

"I cannot see how it will help them, though, to find Lord Gilmore, as he was last seen at the station, I am told," remarked the builder.

“There may be some trace discovered—he might even have returned, you know, after he was seen at the station,” said Erne, remembering Nancy’s words.

“Yes, sir, that is true ; it was a tremendous storm that night—the night he is said to have disappeared, for I remember being very uneasy that some unfinished houses of mine would be blown down ; however, nothing happened.”

Then while Erne was conversing with Mr. Gibson, two policemen arrived, followed a few minutes later by an Inspector, who made no objection to Erne accompanying the party to the riverside villa, when he heard he was a friend of the missing lord.

They accordingly proceeded up the river in two boats, and after a longish pull drew up before the stockade where Juan, the Spaniard, had so often fished and sung, and where Madame de Costa had lately lived.

It was a beautiful May day, and after they had landed, Mr. Gibson looked around him with pardonable pride.

“’Tis a sweet little place, isn’t it, sir ?” he said to Erne, who cordially agreed with him. The villa was certainly looking its best, with the fresh green leaves, the white and pink hawthorns in full bloom, and the whole place full of the charm and beauty of spring. A place for lovers or a young wedded pair, with the birds singing on the boughs and the whisper of the river murmuring close by. Erne lingered on in the sunny garden as the policemen hurried on, eager to examine the house, and as he stood on the little lawn and looked at the water and the sky, his thoughts wandered far away.

They wandered to an early morning ride in a distant land, where a bright-faced young girl was by his side, whose dark eyes were shining full of joy and hope. That face was changed now, but still the fairest face on earth to Godfrey Erne. He was remembering little things she had said ; how she had looked up smiling in his face ; and how her color had flushed and paled.

“I made a mistake—a great mistake,” he thought, sadly enough. “If I had asked Nancy to marry me then, she would have been happier now—but, unluckily, she never knew how well I loved her.”

His old memories were, however, soon interrupted by Mr. Gibson, the builder, who had gone into the house with the policemen, but now came out and joined Erne on the lawn.

"Well, have they found anything?" asked Erne, looking round.

"Nothing, seemingly; everything is left in order, apparently, but Madame or some of her friends must have been thirsty souls, for I never saw so many empty champagne bottles and brandy bottles together as are standing in one of the out-houses. They say the young lord was fond of drink. I wonder if he used to come here and tinkle with Madame?"

Mr. Gibson laughed as he said this, and then turned round and contemplatively looked at the house.

"I built this place, sir," he said, "and lived in it for many years, until my boys and girls began to grow up and wanted more room than there was here for them, but I own I never liked any house as well, and I and my wife have spent many a happy day here."

"I can quite imagine that," smiled Erne, pleasantly.

"May I ask if you are married yourself, sir?" asked the genial builder.

"No;" and a cloud stole over Erne's brow. "I was too poor to marry."

"Well, Major Erne, you'll pardon me for saying so, but I think it's a mistake for young folks to wait until they get rich, because after all the spring of life is the brightest time. I married when I was poor, and we had a hard enough struggle sometimes, but we never lost heart, and cheered each other up when we were a bit down; and now here we are in middle life fairly well-to-do—but then I've worked hard."

"That is the most honorable life of all."

"I think so too, sir; and if you believe me I've got into such a way of building and planning that I never see a house but I think I should like to improve it. Now if you'll make round this way a little bit, I'll show you how I think I could improve this one."

So Erne and the builder walked together to the west side of the little villa, and there Mr. Gibson pointed out to Erne, a pretty verandah covered with Virginia creeper, which ended at this spot.

"Now I fancy if that verandah were carried along this side, as well as in the front, that it would give the place a more picturesque appearance," said Mr. Gibson, with his eyes fixed on the verandah as if mentally measuring it. "It wouldn't cost much, and it might be joined neatly,

and the whole thing fresh painted, and I am certain it would smarten up the house."

He left Erne's side as he spoke, and began pulling away some of the trailing creeper from the end of the verandah, whose long green tendrils fell here upon the ground.

"The worst of this thing is it grows so fast," continued Mr. Gibson, now getting out his pocket-knife to cut the creeper. "Now if the verandah was joined here, sir, you see, it would be a great improvement—and I'll just measure round the house to see how much it would take."

He drew out his measure and began to measure the wall of the house, bending down for the purpose, while Erne stood idly watching him. Suddenly Erne saw him looking fixedly on the ground and feeling it with his hand.

"This ground has been disturbed quite lately," he said presently. "Just look here, Major Erne—perhaps Madame has hidden away something here."

Then Erne went up to where he was standing, and also examined the ground. It was levelled down as with a spade, and the creeper had crept over it, but all the same it was plain to a practised eye that part of it—some six feet in length—had lately been disturbed, and had a different appearance to the rest.

"I'll fetch the Inspector to have a look at this place, I think," said Mr. Gibson, and he went into the house for the purpose, but Erne stood still, looking at the sun glinting on the newly-turned soil.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BUILDER'S FIND.

A FEW minutes later the Inspector, Mr. Gibson, and the two policemen appeared, and instantly began examining the ground with the keenest interest.

"This soil has been dug up this spring," said the Inspector; "look, it has none of the green mould which the winter's damp has left on the rest. Well, Mr. Gibson, we must dig up this place with your leave?"

"Certainly, you have my fullest leave," answered the builder.

They had not brought any spades, but Mr. Gibson pointed out what used to be the tool-house in his time, and there they found two spades, one of which had a good deal of soil clinging to it and was rusty.

"This spade has been put away wet," said the Inspector, looking at it. "Well, there's one a-piece for you," he added, looking at the two policemen; "now, my men, begin and dig away as fast as you can."

The policemen needed no second bidding. They began to dig, and it was not hard work. The soil had evidently recently been dug up, and Erne, the Inspector, and Mr. Gibson, stood round watching them. Spadeful after spadeful they threw up; deeper and deeper they went down, until, when about four feet below the surface, one of the spades suddenly struck on a resisting substance.

"There's something here," said one of the policemen, and he moved the position of his spade slightly, and the next minute raised with it a man's boot!

"By Heavens! it's a man!" cried the Inspector. "Look, there's the end of the trouser—put down your spades, men used your hands now—I believe that we've found him!"

The policemen now began pushing aside the soil with their hands, while Erne, the Inspector, and Mr. Gibson eagerly assisted. There were a few breathless moments, and then a hand—a human hand—soiled and crushed—appeared, and the Inspector, throwing himself on the ground, contrived to catch hold of this, and pulled up an arm, and a minute or two later one of the policemen caught another arm, and between them from the mould—from his unhallowed grave—they raised a form, a face.

Erne gave a shocked exclamation as his eyes fell on the features, which he instantly recognized.

"It is Lord Gilmore!" he cried. "He has been murdered and then buried here."

"Is this Lord Gilmore?" said the Inspector, turning eagerly to Erne. "You knew him, did you not?"

"Yes, this is Lord Gilmore," answered Erne, looking steadily at the disfigured man. But there was no mistaking the handsome features, the full lips shaded by the thick brown moustache and the bright brown hair. Yes, it was Gerard, Lord Gilmore, whose brief life lay ended here, and in whose half-open hazel eyes there still lingered a look of unutterable horror and pain through all the foulness of the damp and clinging soil.

And the form—that bitter birthright which had marred his life—was also plainly visible. He had been flung into his grave unshrined and uncoffined, in haste and secrecy, but when they lifted him out of it they could find no wound on his person to account for his death. He had, however, been robbed, at least nothing of value remained, and his shirt sleeves were open, as though the studs had been torn out, and he had no money whatever about him.

“He has been lured here and murdered, I suppose,” said the inspector, “or murdered in the train and carried here—at all events the foreign woman who lived here had a hand in his death.”

“And to think such a horrible thing should have happened in my house,” said Mr. Gibson, whose rosy face had grown pale.

“Poor fellow !” said Erne, and he kneeled down and lifted one of the chill, soiled hands, and thought as he did so of the day when they had gone together to Gateford Manor House, and of Gilmore’s merry, careless words when Miss Gifford had given them the diamond rings. “He was kind-hearted and good-natured in the extreme,” he said aloud, “whoever did it, it is a shameful deed.”

“It was probably for his money,” remarked the inspector. “I wonder how they killed him? But there will, of course, have to be a post-mortem, and now I think we had best carry him into the house.”

So they lifted him up and carried him into the house, where he had sat so often gazing into the dark eyes that had lured him to his death. And they laid him on a couch, and Erne reverently covered his face and drew down the blinds of the room, for the sunlight seemed to make the grim sight more weird, more ghastly.

“And his young wife,” said Erne, “who must tell her?”

“If you knew the poor gentleman,” answered the Inspector, “perhaps you could break it better to her than a stranger?”

“I knew him, but not his wife,” replied Erne gravely ; “it is a terrible thing to tell.”

“Poor soul, poor soul !” groaned the kindly builder, “and to think we should come upon him, just by accident as it were, when I was measuring for the new verandah—aye, aye, we never can tell what the earth hides nor the sea, nor the river indeed for that matter—but it’s a shocking business.”

"He had a strange history and has had a strange death," said Erne. "But what will you do now, Inspector? Will you leave him here or take him home?"

"We will have to put him in his coffin before we can take him home, sir," replied the inspector; "and before we do that the coroner's inquest will have to be held, and the post-mortem by the doctors to discover the cause of death. But his wife, if he has one, ought to be told, and if you would very kindly undertake the sad office?"

"It is a very painful one—but someone must do it—if you wish me to do so, I will break it to her as gently as I can," said Erne, and he thought also at this moment of another woman to whom the terrible news would have to be told.

They settled then that Erne, the Inspector, and Mr. Gibson were to return at once to Maidenhead, and the two policemen to remain in charge of the dead body until relieved by some of their comrades. The Inspector, of course, had a great deal of necessary business before him, and therefore made haste to leave the little riverside villa where Gerard, Lord Gilmore, had lain hidden away so long; and with a very heavy heart Erne started on his sad errand.

They rowed back to Maidenhead, and then parted, Erne proceeding to the Rookery to see poor May, and Mr. Gibson hurrying homewards, full of his dreadful discovery. And when Erne reached the picturesque, roomy old house where May had spent her brief married life, he felt the task he had undertaken almost too heavy for him. He rang the door bell, and asked to see Lady Gilmore, and while he was speaking to the servant, a pale-faced, hollowed, anxious-looking young woman came into the hall and looked eagerly at Erne.

"Do you want to see me? Have you brought any news?" she asked hastily.

"Are you Lady Gilmore?" answered Erne, taking off his hat.

"Yes; but has anything been discovered? I heard they were going to search the house the young man said he had seen my—poor husband go to? Oh, please, sir, tell me—do you know anything?"

"I have brought you some news," said Erne in a faltering voice; "I knew Lord Gilmore—"

"But what; what is the news?" cried the unhappy

young woman, seizing Erne's hand and looking wildly at him. "Ah!" and she gave a loud shriek; "I see it written in your face—they have found him dead!"

"I wish I had good news for you, Lady Gilmore; but, unhappily I have not!"

Again a wild and bitter shriek escaped from May's quivering lips.

"I knew it—I knew it! He is dead!" she cried. "Oh, sir, speak!" she went on, wringing her hands together in her bitter distress; "nothing you can tell me is worse than what I think. The night he went away I dreamt something black and dark was following him. Oh, my my poor Gerard—my poor, poor Gerard!"

Her grief seemed absolutely overwhelming, and with the deepest feeling of pity in his heart, Erne put out his hand and led her into a room, the door of which was standing open.

"Tell me everything," she wept and prayed, and with faltering lips Erne at last told her part of the sad truth.

"Lord Gilmore is dead," he said; but how could he go on with the dreadful story?

"Where is he? Let me go to him!" she cried wildly. "Why have they not brought him home?"

"He is at the little villa that they searched to-day; they will bring him home presently," said Erne, trying to speak soothingly.

"At the little villa? All this time! Then, then he was murdered there; murdered that dreadful night?"

Shriek after shriek now burst from May's frenzied lips, and in vain Erne and the servants who now ran in tried to compose her. It was a terrible scene, and in the midst of it a grave-faced elderly man walked into the room and at once went up to the unhappy woman and laid his hand tenderly on her shoulder.

"They have told thee, then, my dear, dear lass!" he said, in a voice full of compassion. "It's a sore, sore grief; but for thy old father's sake try to bear it."

"Oh! father, he was murdered—my Gerard, my poor, poor Gerard. Oh! father, take me to him now."

She flung herself into her father's arms as she spoke, and John Sumners drew her to his breast and kissed her brow.

"Hush, hush, my lass—my dear, dear, lass," he whispered, "think, for thy bairn's sake."

“And he will never see it,” wailed poor May; “and—and I hoped so much—I thought at least he would love the child.”

All this was becoming so intensely painful to Erne that he felt he could endure it no longer.

“Can I be of any possible use to you or Lady Gilmore?” he said, addressing John Sumners. “I knew Lord Gilmore, and if I can do anything for you—”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” answered the old man. “My poor girl is in bitter grief, or she, too, would thank ye—but I would just like a word or two with ye before ye go—May, my lassie, I’ll be back to ye in a moment.”

He placed her on a couch as he spoke, and beckoned to one of the servants to go near her, and then he left the room with Erne, and took him to another, and closed the door.

“I heard down in the town, sir,” he said, “that a soldier gentleman who had known the poor lad who is gone, had been with the police to-day, when his body was found, and that you had come here to tell my daughter—you’ll be the gentleman, I suppose?”

“Yes; I was there when Lord Gilmore’s body was found.

“They say he was buried in the garden of the villa. Is that so?”

“Yes;” and then Erne described how the unhallowed grave had been discovered, and the old man groaned and solemnly raised his hand.

“The Lord Himself pointed out the spot,” he said. “Though they had hidden the poor lad away in the deep earth, his blood still cried out for vengeance.”

“It is a terrible affair, and my heart bleeds for your daughter.”

“They grew up together, sir—boy and girl—and were sweethearts when they were but bairns, and May’s heart was just set upon him. Aye, it was an ill business that they ever took the lad away from the village where he was reared. They who placed him there had better have let him stayed, as nought but mischief and black trouble has come of taking him away.”

“It was a fatal mistake of Lady Gilmore’s from the first.”

“Aye, she ha’na right to act as she did, and the lad Gerard might ha’ been living now and well if she had na’ twice wronged him. But, poor soul, poor soul, her punishment will be hard to bear.”

"Yes, indeed. Well, Mr. Sumners, I think I shall go now, and I am glad at least that you are with your daughter;" and Erne put out his slender brown hand, which was grasped by Mr. Sumners' horny work-worn palm.

"I thank you, sir," he said simply; and as these two men, so diverse in social position, parted, both had formed a high opinion of the other's character.

"That is an honest man," thought Godfrey Erne, as he quitted the house.

"Yon's a true gentleman," reflected John Sumners, as slowly and sorrowfully he wended his way back to his daughter's side. "Would that my dear lass had wedded such an one as he."

Erne also felt oppressed and sorrowful, not only by the sad scene he had just left, and the terrible discovery he had witnessed a little earlier, but by the prospect of being bound to carry the tragic news to Nancy. He returned, therefore, at once to town, and about nine o'clock in the evening proceeded to Nancy's house, and found her sitting in her pretty drawing-room with her mother.

It was seemingly a peaceful, almost happy, scene that he entered; and yet Erne knew that Nancy's heart was already full of miserable anxiety, and that his tidings would only add to her trouble. She looked up quickly as he entered, and then rose and put her hand in his.

"I have been hoping you would come," she said. "Have you been to Maidenhead?"

"Yes," said Erne, slowly, as he shook hands with Mrs. Loftus.

"And," went on Nancy, her breath coming a little faster, and her color varying, "did you hear anything? Did the police search the villa where it is said Gerard used to go?"

"I went with them there," answered Erne so gravely that Nancy felt herself growing a little faint.

"Did they find anything?" she asked, with faltering tongue.

"Yes," said Erne, "they did find something—I am the bearer of ill news, unhappily, Mrs. Gifford—Lord Gilmore is dead."

"Dead!" echoed Nancy starting to her feet, every particle of color now fading from her face. "How—how do they know?"

"His body was found at the villa—I identified it—there

is no doubt that Lord Gilmore has been done to death by foul means, probably for his money and valuables," added Erne considerably, "for he had been robbed as well as murdered."

Nancy sank back on the couch behind her, and something like a moan escaped her white lips.

"My darling child, this terrible news has been too much for you," cried Mrs. Loftus, rising hastily, and running to Nancy's side, and putting her arms round her. "don't, dear, don't look like that—Oh! ring for some water, please. Major Erne; I am afraid Nancy is going to faint."

But Nancy did not faint; she lay back white and cold, as if utterly overcome, and drank some of the water which they brought her.

"I will—be better presently," she said, faintly; "it—was the shock," and she looked up at Erne with her eyes full of fear.

It all came back to her at this moment, pictured so vividly before her eyes, that she might have been actually looking again on Hugh Gifford's face—the face where shuddering horror was written so plainly—as he entered his dressing-room on the night of the 29th of April, when she had seen him hide something that he carried away; when she had listened to the grim and guilt-pointing words that he had uttered in his drunken sleep.

"I should perhaps not have told you," said Erne, gently; "but I did not know what to do."

"Yes, it was best to tell me—best that I should know," said Nancy, still in the same weak, faltering voice.

"But you did not know this poor young man very well, you know, dear," said Mrs. Loftus, soothingly, stroking her daughter's cold hand.

"Poor Gerard—poor, poor Gerard!" sighed Nancy.

"It's a dreadful thing, certainly," went on Mrs. Loftus, unconscious she was but increasing Nancy's wretchedness. "But where was he found in the villa, Major Erne? In one of the rooms?"

Erne made a gesture to indicate to Mrs. Loftus that he did not wish to answer this question; but Nancy saw this as well as her mother.

"Do not let us talk of it any more, continued Mrs. Loftus, now most anxious to repair her indiscretion. "Tell me about Lady Blenkinsop, Major Erne, and the General, and all our old friends."

So the subject was dropped for the present, and Erne and Mrs. Loftus began talking of various former military acquaintances in the hopes of distracting Nancy's mind from the weird subject on which it was brooding. But Nancy made no effort to join in this conversation. She lay back on the couch with her eyes cast down, her lips quivering occasionally, and her whole appearance indicating that she was greatly overcome. Presently, however, Mrs. Loftus left the room for a short while, as she had received a letter from her sister-in-law, Mrs. Barclay, to which she had been writing a reply when Erne arrived, and which she now wished to despatch to the post. And she had scarcely closed the door behind her when Nancy started to her feet, and at once went to Erne and laid her hand on his arm.

"Tell me, Major Erne—when mother is not here—where was he found?" she asked in a low, strange voice.

"Why talk on such a subject?" answered Erne, taking her by the hand. "It only distresses you to do so; try to forget it."

"I must know," went on Nancy in thrilling accents; "was—he buried? Was he in a grave?"

"I do not wish to tell you."

"I must hear—I—I know before you tell me—they had murdered him, and——"

"Nancy, as your old friend, let me advise you to ask no more. This unfortunate young man was probably lured to this villa by the foreign woman who lived there for the purpose of robbing him, for he had certainly been robbed. This was the view the police took of it, and it is most likely the true one."

"Was he in a grave?" repeated Nancy.

"Yes," said Erne at last; and as he made this admission a cry of anguish escaped Nancy's lips, and she fell tottering backward and would have fallen if Erne had not caught her in his arms.

He carried her back to the couch and rang the bell violently for her mother, and when Mrs. Loftus hurried into the room she found Nancy insensible. And all that night she was very ill, and as Mrs. Loftus sat by her bedside, Nancy began to mutter in her broken sleep, her mind evidently dwelling constantly on the tragic circumstances of her brother-in-law's death.

“Don’t put him in unless he is dead !” presently Mrs. Loftus’ shocked ears heard her cry. “For God’s sake, don’t do it unless you are sure !”

CHAPTER XLVI.

“GREATER THAN I CAN BEAR !”

AND these weird and terrible words awoke for the first time a suspicion in the mother’s mind that a dark and haunting shadow had fallen on her daughter’s heart. That Nancy’s married life had been an unhappy one, and that her husband had forsaken her, Mrs. Loftus already knew. But as she listened to Nancy’s feeble murmurings, she began to understand that some tragic under-current must also be oppressing her mind, and her extraordinary agitation at the news of her brother-in-law’s death naturally turned Mrs. Loftus’ thoughts in that direction.

But she said nothing, and asked no questions, but nursed poor Nancy with the greatest tenderness and care. And Nancy was ill many days after this : ill when the Coroner’s inquest was held on the body of the unfortunate young man who had been lured to his doom. At this inquest Major Erne was called upon to give evidence, and the unhappy young widow also had to tell the same sad story that we already know ; how Gerard, Lord Gilmore, had left the Rookery on the 29th of April, with the avowed intention of starting for town by the nine o’clock train, and how she never saw him again in life.

Then the station-master gave his evidence, and positively swore that he saw and spoke to Lord Gilmore at five or seven minutes to eleven o’clock on the same night ; stating that he could not be mistaken on account of the peculiarity of Lord Gilmore’s figure ; and he also added that he appeared to have been drinking heavily, and spoke very indistinctly.

John Sumners identified the body as that of his son-in-law, who had formerly borne the name of Gerard Brewster ; and Major Erne also identified the hapless young man who had died so drear a death. The policemen gave evidence as to the finding of the body buried close

to the wall of the riverside villa, last inhabited by Madame de Costa ; and inhabited by her at the time of the disappearance of Lord Gilmore ; and Mr. Gibson, the builder, stated the facts regarding the letting of the house, and the return of the keys to the house-agent after a brief tenancy on the part of that lady. But the medical evidence was the most important ; the two doctors who had made the post-mortem examination proving Gerard, Lord Gilmore, had come to his death by poisoning, no wound whatever or injury being found on his person.

“The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the evidence, therefore, was—provided that the station-master was correct in his statement—that the unfortunate young lord had, while in a drunken condition in the train been induced to leave it at the next station, and that he had been lured back to the villa, and there poisoned, and that Madame de Costa must have been cognizant of these facts, if not the actual perpetrator of the crime, and a warrant was accordingly issued for her apprehension.

She had stated in a letter to the house-agent that she was leaving the villa on account of the illness of a relative in the South of France, and this was about the only clue she had left behind her. But a verdict of “Wilful murder” was returned by the jury against her, and also against her two Spanish servants, names unknown.

Erne remained to hear the verdict, and then returned to town ; and later in the day the encoffined form of the murdered man was carried back to the house he had left with so light a heart, and the young wife he had ceased to love wailed and wept by it in bitterest grief.

And other tears were shed—bitter, bitter tears—over the young lord’s tragic fate. Mrs. Brewster, who had remained at Wrothsley after her return there, had from the first news of his disappearance felt the deepest anxiety regarding him, and had eagerly sought for every scrap of information concerning him. And when the terrible tidings reached Wrothsley that his dead body had been discovered in the garden of the riverside villa, Mrs. Brewster gave way to the most passionate grief. She had truly loved the adopted son whom she had tended and reared as her own, and, to do Gerard justice, he had always been most kind and considerate to her, and even after he had assumed the title continued to treat her with affection, and used to write to her occasionally and send

her presents; and Mrs. Brewster was never weary of praising him. The news of his death was therefore a terrible blow to her, and she completely broke down under it, crying out that they had killed her boy by taking him away from her; that had he been with her he would have been living.

Father Hayward had given positive orders to every servant in the Castle that no newspaper was to be allowed to fall into Lady Gilmore's hands that contained any allusions to her eldest son's disappearance; but when the actual account of the murder appeared the good man scarcely knew how to act. He telegraphed to Nancy to come to Wrothsley, but received a reply from Mrs. Loftus informing him that her daughter, Mrs. Gifford, was too ill to leave her bed, and quite incapable of travelling. Then he bethought him of Miss Gifford, but the grim old lady at Gateford Manor House positively refused to go near Wrothsley under the circumstances.

"It's all her own doing, not mine," she said tartly. "She unfitted this poor lad for his station, and then to punish Hugh Gifford for marrying a girl that is a deal too good for him, she told the truth about her own sin and folly, and this is the end of it! The lad's head was turned naturally enough and he was vain as a peacock, and some artful jade of a foreign woman had got hold of him no doubt, and flattered him up and made a fool of him, and then murdered him for the sake of his money, and his diamond rings and studs that he was so fond of displaying."

"He did not turn out certainly as I had hoped," said Father Hayward sorrowfully.

"No," answered Miss Gifford sharply; "not quite such a good Catholic, eh, as you expected? He was every inch his father's son except that he was humpbacked, and I must say amongst you, you have made a fine business of it for they tell me now the lad married some fisher-girl before he came to his end, and that a child is expected, so Hugh Gifford and my boy may never have the title after all."

"That is true."

"And the worst of it, too, for no doubt this poor lad Gerard was not fit to be Lord Gilmore. I could just shake that stupid woman at Wrothsley when I think of all the mischief she has done, and the trouble she has

brought about by her folly and pride. For it was nothing else. If Nancy Loftus had been a duke's daughter instead of a governess, we should never have heard a word about the hunchback, who was supposed to be dead and in his coffin twenty-five years ago."

The priest said nothing more; he saw, in fact, it was useless to try to persuade Miss Gifford to try to break the terrible news of her eldest son's death to Lady Gilmore, and with a very sorrowful heart he returned to Wrothsley, feeling that this painful duty had now devolved on himself.

He asked to see Lady Gilmore, and found her in a state of considerable excitement.

"What is the matter, Father Hayward?" she said quickly as the priest entered the room. "The children have just been here and Dolly tells me the servants are whispering together, and won't answer their questions; and when I sent for Mrs. Brewster a message was brought to me that she was too ill to see me. Does—does this mean anything?"

She was sitting on a couch dressed in a bed-gown, and her face was pale and twitching, and there was a look of great anxiety in her eyes, and the good Father felt absolutely afraid to answer her question.

"You must try not to excite yourself," he said.

"You are keeping something back? You have heard some news?" cried Lady Gilmore, raising herself up and grasping the end of the couch to support herself. "Has anything been heard of Gerard—of my son?"

"There has some news been heard of him," said Father Hayward slowly and painfully.

"Not bad news, say not bad news?" asked Lady Gilmore in great excitement. "I have been getting uneasy, though Hugh said I need not be. Surely he is not ill?"

"No, Lady Gilmore, he is not ill," answered the priest solemnly.

"Then what is it? Why do you look so strange? Oh! don't torture me thus. Has—has he done anything wrong—any folly?"

Father Hayward cast down his eyes, which were full of compassion for the unhappy woman before him.

"A great sorrow has come to you, my daughter," he said; "a great trial and grief—but we must bow to the Almighty Will——"

A piercing shriek interrupted Father Hayward's words, and Lady Gilmore started forward and caught him by the arm.

"What—what do you mean?" she cried, her face livid with sudden terror, and her sunken eyes gleaming wildly.

"I entreat you to try to compose yourself—the sorrow I speak of comes to us all—try, my daughter, I implore you, to bear it with submission—your eldest son, Lord Gilmore, is—dead!"

Again a wild and piercing shriek fell on the priest's startled ear.

"Dead! dead!" she screamed. "Surely not dead! Oh! Father Hayward, say not dead!"

She grasped his arm tighter, and peered into his face with an expression of such misery that the priest was visibly moved.

"It is a sad and sorrowful fact," he said slowly, "and I grieve greatly to be forced to tell it to you—but Lord Gilmore is dead."

"How did he die? Why was I not told, then, that he was ill?" cried Lady Gilmore wildly. "Why was this kept from me?"

Father Hayward was silent; what, indeed, could he say?

"How long was he ill? Why don't you speak?" went on the unhappy lady, still looking wildly up in the priest's averted face. "Say, how did he die?"

"It—was a sudden death," faltered Father Hayward.

"Sudden! Do you mean an accident?"

Again the priest could find no words to tell the dreadful truth.

"What are you keeping back?" cried Lady Gilmore. "You will drive me mad—tell me the truth—how did he die?"

"It is a terrible thing—he is supposed to have been murdered——"

The shriek of horror which burst from Lady Gilmore's frenzied lips at this dreadful word rang for days afterwards in Father Hayward's ears.

"*Murdered!*" she repeated in a hollow voice of anguish. "Now—now I understand—my punishment is greater than I can bear—did Hugh——"

But she never finished the terrible question trembling on

her ashen lips. In a moment the hideous thought flashed through her brain that one brother had taken the other's life; that the sin of her youth had brought bitter misery first, and now death, and the idea killed her.

She staggered back and would have fallen had not Father Hayward caught her in his arms, and as he did so he instantly perceived that she was stricken with another, and probably a fatal, fit.

He laid her quickly on the couch, and then rang violently for assistance, despatching a servant at once for the nearest doctor, and directing telegrams to be sent by the butler, Graham, for her usual physicians in town. But long before any of them arrived, Father Hayward saw all medical assistance would be in vain, and that the gathering mists of death were fast dimming Lady Gilmore's sight.

He had but time to administer the last holy rites of his Church, and then, standing by her, holding the upraised crucifix before her dying eyes, he implored her to think no longer of the troubles of the world, but to give her last thoughts to God.

"Let your sorrow cease now, my daughter," he cried; "on the portals of Eternity do not look back!"

She looked up for a moment, and then a shiver—a shudder—passed through her frame, and quivered over her face; and the next moment the wayward passionate heart had ceased to beat, the troubled, sorrowful spirit was still.

Thus died Dorothy, Lady Gilmore, a woman the very warmth and strength of whose affections had caused all the miseries of her life; a woman who loved blindly, passionately, but not wisely, and whose last moments were embittered by the memory of the early sin and folly by which she had vainly hoped to keep her husband's love!

CHAPTER XLVII.

FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS.

THEY buried her by the side of the husband she had loved too well : in the family vault where she had hidden away the little empty coffin, and in which now three Lord Gilmores slept their last sleep.

Thomas, the first lord, the founder of the family ; then Hugh, the second lord, the handsome husband of the dead woman ; and, lastly, Gerard—the murdered lord—who had been but carried there two days before his mother.

And in the vault stood a gloomy-faced man, whose eyes were cast down, and who spoke to none. This was Hugh Gifford, the presumptive lord, in the event of Gerard's child not being born a boy, as the title descended only to the male heirs.

Hugh Gifford had been summoned by Mr. Stafford, the family lawyer, from Paris, to attend his mother's funeral, and this gentleman had also detailed to him the events which had happened at the little riverside villa near Maidenhead ; the finding of his murdered brother's body buried in the garden ; and the expected birth of the child, who might be destined to succeed to the wealth and honors of the House of Gilmore.

Mr. Stafford also mentioned that a warrant for the apprehension of Madame de Costa and her two Spanish servants had been issued, and that some police-officers had started for the South of France in quest of this lady. He told him, too, that his mother's sudden death had been caused by the terrible news of her eldest son's murder, and he plainly hinted to him that he thought he ought to be now in England to look after the family interests.

To this letter, after a little delay, Hugh Gifford had replied that he would come to England to attend his mother's funeral, but that until Gerard's child was born,

he did not care to interfere with any of the present family arrangements.

And he carried this out. He arrived at Wrothsley only on the morning of Lady Gilmore's funeral, and he met Mr. Stafford there and repeated what he had written.

"I prefer living in Paris, or somewhere on the Continent, at present," he said; "for, as I told you when I wrote to you about paying my wife the allowance and the rent of the house in town, she and I have quarrelled, and I don't care to come in her way."

"But surely with so charming a young lady as Mrs. Gifford, any temporary little quarrel might be made up," smiled the lawyer.

Hugh Gifford shrugged his shoulders at the suggestion.

"No," he said, "we are better friends apart; but of course you will let me know when this child is born?"

"Of course; in the event of it proving a girl you will be Lord Gilmore."

Again Hugh Gifford shrugged his shoulders.

"And in the event of it proving a boy I won't?" he said, with affected carelessness. "Well, such is life."

This brief conversation took place before the funeral, which was conducted with state and solemnity, and according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church, in which faith the deceased lady had lived and died. Miss Gifford, of Gateford Manor House, however, refused to attend it, and Mrs. Hugh Gifford—Nancy—was too ill to do so. Lady Gilmore's sudden death proved a second shock to Nancy, and her nervous prostration was very great.

Hugh Gifford made no attempt to see her during his brief visit to England, or to hold any communication with her whatever. He left Wrothsley half an hour after his mother's funeral was over, and shuddered as if struck with a sudden chill, as he quitted the family vault, and drank a great deal more brandy than was good for him, the family lawyer observed disapprovingly.

It was a gloomy day at the great house after the old mistress had been carried away and the funeral guests were gone. Many of the servants received a month's notice from Mr. Stafford, and only some of the old retainers were kept on until it was known who should actually be the next owner of the great possessions left by the first Lord Gilmore,

Mrs. Brewster remained as housekeeper, and Miss Pennythorne the children's governess, and Graham, the butler, and a few others ; but the magnificent state apartments were closed, and their splendors hidden away from the sight of man.

"It's a bad business from first to last," Graham said to Mrs. Brewster, who wore deepest mourning for the adopted son she had lost ; "if only my poor lady had let well alone, the place would have gone on as it was, and Mr. Hugh's son would have been the little heir, and everything as it should be."

"They took my boy from me, and nothing but evil has come of it," wept Mrs. Brewster, who could not get over poor Gerard's sad fate. "Yes, she who has gone has a deal to answer for, and I only wish I had had nothing to do with it."

Mr. Stafford also arranged with poor May at Maidenhead—the widowed and lowly-born Lady Gilmore—that for the present she was to remain on at the Rookery ; but of course in the event of her child being born a boy, it would be her duty, he told her, to live in the principal family mansion, and rear her son according to his future state. In the meanwhile her father agreed to stay with her, and his presence was a great comfort and help to the almost broken-hearted May, who, whatever Gerard's faults had been, had loved him dearly.

Nancy heard of all these family arrangements from her mother, while still lying on her sick-bed ; heard with fast beating heart that her husband had been present at his mother's funeral, and was thankful she did not hear this until at the same time she was told that he had again left England.

Mr. Stafford called on Mrs. Loftus—or rather on Nancy, who was too ill to see him—and gave Mrs. Loftus this information, and told her, also, that until after the birth of Gerard's child, that Hugh Gifford had declined to make any changes whatever.

And not until nearly a month after the discovery of Gerard's body, and Lady Gilmore's sudden death, did Nancy leave her bedroom and appear downstairs. She looked greatly changed and shattered ; so changed that when one afternoon, two days later, to her great surprise Miss Gifford walked into her drawing-room, where she was languidly lying on a couch, the old lady lifted her hands in amazement.

"Child ! what have you been doing with yourself?" she said.

"I have been ill, you know, Miss Gifford," answered Nancy, rising and kissing the wrinkled cheek.

"Ill ! Yes, ill, and grieving, too, eh ? Is it true, child, what I have been told, that your husband has actually left you ?"

"Yes," said Nancy, and her eyes fell, and her face grew a little paler ; " it is true."

"Well, bad as the Giffords are, root and branch, about women, I could not quite have believed this ! What was the reason ? You may as well speak plainly, for though I've a sharp tongue I can hold it, if needs be."

"We quarrelled."

"Quarrelled ? Most married folks quarrel, but they make it up again," replied Miss Gifford sharply, with her keen eyes fixed on Nancy's changing face. "There is something behind, I suppose—something you are keeping back."

"I have nothing more to tell you, Miss Gifford."

"Least said, soonest mended, I suppose you think, eh ? Well, that friend of yours, Major Erne, told me that Hugh Gifford had left you, and that you had quarrelled ; and I told him pretty plainly to his face that I didn't believe you were a woman to quarrel without very good cause, which I suppose you had ?"

Nancy was silent.

"The long and short of it is, child, that I think he has behaved shamefully to you, and I've come up to London on purpose to take you and little Tommy back with me to Gateford, and I think the sooner you make up your mind to leave here the better."

"You are very good."

"No, I'm not ! I don't set up to be good, but I wish people to know that you are not to blame in this matter ; that the person to blame is Hugh Gifford, and all I can say is he ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself if he isn't !"

"My mother is with me, you know," said Nancy, gently.

"Yes, I know ; but your mother can't give you the same position in the world now that your husband has left you as your husband's great-aunt can. How is the child ?"

"Very well indeed," said Nancy smiling.

"Send for him, and make up your mind to go back

with me the day after to-morrow, for you want country air and change for one thing, and protection for another."

And the old lady got her own way, and took Nancy and her boy back with her to Gateford Manor House, and Nancy told herself she was glad to go; glad to leave the house where she had suffered such haunting anxiety and dread.

In the still old garden at Gateford, with its trim clipped yew hedges, its ancient sun-dial, and moss-grown walks, she somehow felt more at peace. The child thrived here, too, and the dark shadows from the past seemed further away. And sometimes Godfrey Erne used to ride over to Gateford, and the old lady always made him welcome. Thus the summer passed away, and in the early autumn news came to Gateford that Gerard's child was born, and that a new Lord Gilmore had come to share the pleasures and troubles of the world.

And this news was a relief to Nancy, though a great disappointment to Miss Gifford, who openly grumbled at it.

"Nobody wanted it," she said; "little Tommy should have been the heir, not this fisher-girl's brat."

But Nancy took her boy in her arms and kissed him tenderly, and murmured softly some words of thankfulness in his ear.

The birth of this child she knew would prevent Hugh Gifford from again holding a prominent position in the world; would probably keep him still abroad, and Nancy knew that this was best. And a week or two later, when at the earnest advice of Mr. Stafford, the family lawyer, and Father Hayward, May, now Lady Gilmore, came to reside at Wrothsley with her baby, Nancy proposed one day to Miss Gifford that they should go to call on her.

"Not I," replied the old lady, brusquely. "I'm no hypocrite, and I cannot go and tell her I am pleased to see either her or her baby, when I am not."

"I should like to go if you don't object, Miss Gifford. Poor young woman, I feel so much for her, and I should like to take our boy," said Nancy.

This soft answer mollified Miss Gifford.

"Well, my dear, you are your own mistress; go, if you want to go, and I've no objection for the boy going too, if you choose to take him."

Thus Nancy went, taking with her the fine little fellow, who was the idol of the household at Gateford ; and as she drove up to the stately mansion which had once been her home, and where her baby had been born she could scarcely control her emotions.

She had not been strong enough before to go to Wrothslay, since she had been at Miss Gifford's, but Miss Pennythorne and the children had been twice over to spend the day at Gateford while she had been there. And Nancy had written to Miss Pennythorne to tell her of her proposed visit to young Lady Gilmore, and there was great excitement in consequence at the Castle.

She was received at the entrance by Graham with great state, and conducted to the morning-room which poor Lady Gilmore used to occupy ; and as she entered it, carrying her little son in her arms, a pretty fair young woman in the deepest mourning rose to receive her.

"Mrs. Hugh Gifford, my lady," announced Graham, and thus for the first time the sisters-in-law met, athwart whose lives such a tragic shadow had fallen.

Nancy put out her hand a little nervously, and May took it gratefully and tremblingly.

"It is very good of you to come and see me," she said.

"I am very pleased to do so," answered Nancy gently.

"And this is your little boy?" said May wistfully, and she took Master Tommy's sturdy hand. "What a fine little fellow—he looks far stronger than my poor little one."

"He has always been strong, I am happy to say."

"He is a beautiful child—the children told me about him—it is very kind of you to have brought him to-day."

"You must introduce him to his little cousin," smiled Nancy.

"Yes ; my poor baby is delicate—but no wonder !"

May's delicate complexion flushed painfully as she made this allusion to the sorrowful circumstances of the birth of her little son.

Nancy did not speak for a moment, then she suddenly and impulsively put out her hand and clasped the young widow's.

"Do not let us talk of—the past," she said with emotion ; "let us talk of the children. I should like to see your baby."

So the little heir of this magnificent house and the vast

wealth left by his great-great-grandfather was brought in for inspection, and Nancy took him tenderly in her arms and kissed his tiny face, upon which her own boy, Master Tommy, whom she had placed in an easy chair, began to roar vigorously.

"Hush, hush, darling," cried Nancy, going up to him, and kneeling down before him with May's baby, still in her arms; "this is your little cousin, my darling, whom you must always love."

But Tommy turned away his head indignantly, and would not be comforted until Nancy resigned the new baby and again took him in her arms.

"And his name?" said Nancy kindly, after she had succeeded in calming Tommy's injured feelings.

"There could be but one name for him," answered May with quivering lips—"Gerard."

He was only a poor little specimen of humanity—a frail white-faced babe, born in trouble, as the poor young mother had said—yet he had already proved a blessing and a comfort to her desolate heart.

"He is a dear little fellow," said Nancy. "And your father—Major Erne told me about him—is he with you?"

"Yes, I persuaded him to come," replied May simply. "It is so different everything here to what he has been accustomed to—but he came for my sake."

"I am very glad. Some day I hope you will let me know him."

"He would think that a great honor. He said Major Erne seemed a very kind gentleman."

"Yes," said Nancy softly; "I have known him a long long time—he has always been very good to me."

But their conversation was here interrupted by a loud rapping at the door.

"I have no doubt that is the children," said May, going to the door; "they have been waiting most anxiously to see you. You are a great favorite of theirs."

It was Dossy and Flossy, who rushed in and kissed Nancy and Master Tommy rapturously, who again resented the liberties he was being subjected to.

"Let me nurse him," said Dossy; but Tommy firmly refused to leave his mother's arms.

"We are so glad you have come, Nancy" went on Dossy.

"Oh! so glad," echoed Flossy.

Then they began to prattle on about the new baby, and Miss Pennythorne, and Miss Gifford; asking when they might go again to Gateford, but strange to tell they never mentioned their poor mother. It seemed all so strange to Nancy to be here in such different circumstances to those in which she had first entered this house as governess to these little girls. And the present Lady Gilmore was such a contrast to the last! Still the visit passed off more pleasantly than she had hoped it would, and when she rose to go, May asked her almost humbly to come soon again.

"I am very glad to know you," said Nancy, and she kissed May's soft pink cheek as she spoke, whose blue eyes instantly filled with tears.

"I—know I am not—like you," she faltered; "but—for poor Gerard's sake—will you come sometimes, for he was always so fond of you."

Thus the sister-in-laws parted; and Nancy returned to Gateford greatly pleased with poor May; but Miss Gifford could not get over Master Tommy's loss.

'Just to think of a poor delicate puny brat like that stepping into Tommy's place," she said crossly; "and I've no doubt he's got a humpback into the bargain."

"I don't think so," answered Nancy.

"If it had only been a girl, it wouldn't have mattered—but thank goodness it may die."

"Oh! no, no, Miss Gifford, do not say that!" cried Nancy with such sudden emotion in her voice and manner that the old lady looked at her in surprise.

"Whatever is the matter with you, child?" she said. "It's natural, isn't it, that I should wish Tommy to be the head of the house when he is called after my brother who was the first Lord Gilmore? Tommy will be a rich man, whether he is Lord Gilmore or not, but still that does not make up."

"Nancy made no reply to this, but that night as she knelt by her baby's cot, she prayed that the frail little child at Wrothsley might live. And she went again and again to see the young mother, whose sweet simple nature had won her own generous and kindly heart. And one day while she was at Wrothsley she and May encountered in the grounds a grave, almost solemn-faced man, whom May stopped.

"This is my father," she said, putting her hand affectionately on John Sumners' arm.

Nancy at once held out her hand, and took the rough toil-worn one in her own.

"How are you, Mr. Sumners?" she said in her pleasant way. "I have just been to see your little grandson, and have been telling his mother here how much stronger he looks."

"I thank ye kindly, lady, for being so good to May," answered honest John Sumners. "As for the babe, I think he's thriving now."

"Father's so fond of him," said May, "and baby's so fond of father, he cries to go to him."

John Sumners looked gratified, and then presently inquired after Major Erne.

"May tells me ye know him well; will ye kindly gi' him my respects when ye see him, for he's a kindly, noble gentleman."

"I will tell him," said Nancy with a smile and a little blush; and she did tell him that very day, for when she returned to Gateford she found Major Erne sitting with the old lady.

"I have a compliment to tell you," said Nancy smilingly, as she shook hands with the grave-faced soldier.

"Well, what is it?" answered Erne with his gray eyes fixed upon her face.

Then she told him what John Sumners had said, and a dusky blush stole over Erne's brown face as he listened.

"That's a grand compliment indeed!" he said with a smile. "I shall have to try to live up to it."

Miss Gifford, upon this, twice nodded her ancient head.

"It strikes me that you do," she remarked.

"You always have a kind word for me, Miss Gifford," said Erne, looking at her.

"I've pretty clear sight, though I'm not so young as I was," she replied, again nodding her head. "Well, Nancy, how's the child at Wrothsley to-day?"

"Oh, he looks so much stronger."

"I declare you just say that to aggravate me! But be quick, now, and dress for dinner, for it's just about the time."

Erne remained for dinner that day at Gateford, for whenever he arrived Miss Gifford used to insist on him staying, though she herself usually dined in the middle of the day; and after the meal was over, the old lady hav-

ing fallen into a gentle doze, Erne and Nancy stood together in one of the old-fashioned deep-niched windows, looking out almost in silence on the still garden beyond, over which the yellow September moon was shining down.

Presently Erne sighed restlessly.

“What is the matter?” asked Nancy glancing up at his grave face. “Are you thinking of something sad?”

“Yes,” said Erne slowly; “I was thinking of a spoilt life.”

Nancy did not speak for a moment, for she understood he was alluding to her own.

“It’s best to bear it with patience, is it not?” she presently said in a low tone.

“Yes, best and noblest—but you are braver than I am,” answered Erne. Then, carried away by the strong and enduring feelings of his heart, he spoke for the first time to Nancy of the love he had felt so long.

“It is terrible to me,” he said in an agitated voice, “to know of the burden which you bear so bravely, and yet not to be able to help you in the least—for—for Nancy, long ago I have cared for you as I have cared for no other. I know I should not speak thus—I will not offend again—but will you tell me one thing? Had I broken the silence which I thought it my duty to keep in those days, would you have been my wife?”

“Yes,” half-whispered Nancy, and her head drooped, and again there was a long silence between them.

“Are you two people asleep there?” presently cried Miss Gifford’s shrill voice. “I declare I have not heard either of you speak for an hour; but come here now and talk to me.”

“Yes, Miss Gifford,” said Erne, and he went and sat down by the old lady; but Nancy stole quietly from the room, for her face was wet with tears.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A HELL ON EARTH.

Two whole years passed away after Nancy stood with Godfrey Erne, in the niched-window at Gateford Manor House, on that September evening, when he had first spoken to her of a love which had not grown cold, and he had never again alluded to it. Two whole years! with their changes and chances, and yet seemingly none had come to Nancy, she still spent a great deal of her time with Miss Gifford, though she kept on her own house in town, to which she had persuaded her mother and family to remove. Thus when she went there she found her mother to welcome her—but Nancy was happiest at Gateford.

She said it suited the child best, and the handsome little fellow liked it best, and all the summer months were generally spent in this quaint and quiet spot, where only Nancy and her son were young. But the revolving years had passed lightly over the head of the ancient dame, who dwelt among her old serving-people, in the old house, where she had lived so long. Miss Gifford was as sharp-tongued as ever, and more devoted to Master Tommy than ever. She had at last been persuaded to ask "the other boy," as she always called the little Lord Gilmore, over to the Manor House, and had observed with satisfaction how young he looked beside his stalwart cousin.

She also still continued to regard Major, now Colonel Erne, with the greatest favor. He frequently came to Gateford, and it was a secret comfort to Nancy's heart to know that she had a friend—brave and faithful—whom she felt sure would stand by in any hour of need.

But they never spoke of it, nor of the love they both now knew. But sometimes Miss Gifford watching them with those sharp keen eyes of hers, wondered if Nancy regarded the handsome, loyal soldier with any stronger feelings than friendship. But if so she made no sign, and

he made none. It was a silent compact between them binding to their hearts alone.

And it chanced two years after, in the very month, when for once Erne had for a few moments loosed the strong curb on his lips, that he was again at Gateford. He had been on leave for several weeks, and Nancy and he had therefore not met for some little time, but the day before, he had dined at the Manor House, by Miss Gifford's invitation, and had remained all night.

And after breakfast—in early morning—these two went out into the dewy garden, and walked pensively enough on the moss-grown paths. A handsome pair, and brave and honest both, their shadowed lives were yet sweeter to them for the unacknowledged bond that bound them fast. Yet they were talking in the most ordinary way, little dreaming that a change—momentous great—was creeping near.

The sun was shining and the cobwebs sparkling on the grass and on the boughs, and the old trees around them were just beginning to shed the first leaves of the falling year. A peaceful scene; the gray old Manor House standing as a background, and even the very flowers around them telling of long by-gone days; and presently the butler—ancient too—appeared, advancing towards them, carrying on an antique silver salver, a large packet for Nancy, which the early post had just brought in.

It was directed in the handwriting of her mother, and Nancy opened it with a smile, thinking it probably contained letters from her brother and little sisters. But as she glanced at the superscription of the inner envelope, which was large too, and sealed, she gave a half-cry, and her face grew suddenly very pale.

“It is from—” escaped her lips.

“Not from Mr. Gifford?” asked Godfrey Erne, sternly.

“Yes,” faltered Nancy; “I—I—cannot read it here.”

“Will you sit down on that seat under the tree there—and I will leave you to read it?” said Erne, whose face also had grown very pale.

“Yes,” she said, for she felt faint, and her footsteps stumbled. It was such a shock to her to see that handwriting again, to have all the past brought back to her as it were, in a moment.

Erne walked by her side to the seat he had indicated,

and then with a very moody brow he turned away. Had the suspended sword fallen; did the faithless husband now wish to return to the faithful wife?

In the meanwhile, with trembling fingers, Nancy had opened the inner large envelope which contained several sheets of foreign notepaper, covered with writing. They were numbered, and number one began as follows:—

“Nancy,—I would not dare write this to you—I should have no right to do so—but that I am a dying man. All the doctors tell me I cannot live long; a few weeks, a few days perhaps; and therefore I venture, knowing the sweetness and truth of your nature, to break my long silence.

“I do so for two reasons; I wish—if you will so far forgive me—to look once more on your face, and that of our boy’s before I die; and I wish also for you to know the truth about that horrible night, when the black misery of my life began. I know that you suspected me, for I saw it written on your shrinking face, and I suppose therefore, during that mad fit of drinking I had the folly to indulge in, and through which you so loyally watched me, and screened me from the suspicions of others, that I had uttered with my tongue, some allusions to the haunting horrors which maddened and pursued my soul.

“To tell my miserable story rightly, I must go back to the days when I was quite a young man, to the days when I met abroad a girl, beautiful with the beauty of her race. She was half-English and half-Spanish, for her father had married an Andalusian woman—”

Thus far Nancy read, and then a shuddering cry escaped her pallid lips at this terrible confirmation of her own suspicions. And the moody-browed man, who was pacing one of the walks near, heard that faint cry, and stopped to listen. Again Nancy moaned aloud, and a moment or two later Godfrey Erne approached the seat where she was sitting with Hugh Gifford’s letter lying open on her lap.

He looked eagerly at her white face, and when Nancy saw him she put out her hand, as if appealingly.

“Godfrey,” she said, in a low and broken voice.

“What is it? Can I help you in anything!” he asked, as he took her hand in his, for he saw Nancy was terribly overcome.

“I should like to go in—he is very ill—I—I cannot

finish this letter here," answered Nancy, in the same broken voice.

"Come then," said Erne, "take my arm—it is only a few steps—let me carry your letter for you."

"No, no!" cried Nancy, in sudden terror, and she clasped the letter still tighter in her hand; and then rose tremblingly, and had actually to lean on Erne's arm for support as she tottered towards the house.

Miss Gifford, from her dining-room window, saw them walking thus, and noticed the deadly whiteness of Nancy's face.

"Something must have happened," thought the shrewd old woman; "perhaps I had best leave them alone."

She did not go out into the hall, therefore, to make any inquiries, but a few moments later Erne entered the room looking exceedingly disturbed.

"What is the matter?" said Miss Gifford sharply. "Has Nancy had any bad news, she looked as if she were going to faint?"

"Mr. Gifford is very ill," answered Erne with reserve.

"Serve him right!" retorted Miss Gifford, yet more sharply. "He surely has not had the impudence to ask Nancy to go to nurse him?"

"I did not see the letter."

"I shall see it though! Where is Nancy?"

"She went to her own bedroom."

Miss Gifford, therefore, at once proceeded there as fast as her ebon stick and her ancient legs could carry her.

She rapped at Nancy's door, but on receiving no reply she turned the handle, but found the door was locked inside.

"Child, I wish to speak to you!" she cried in her shrill voice.

"I cannot see anyone just now, Miss Gifford—please don't ask me," answered Nancy from within, and Miss Gifford could tell by her tone she was terribly agitated.

"Surely that man—Hugh Gifford——"

"Oh! please go away, Miss Gifford, I cannot bear it!" wept Nancy; and after a moment's consideration Miss Gifford did turn away, grumbling, and very full of wrath as she went.

"I could not have believed she was such a fool," she muttered grimly; "crying about that man, indeed!"

In the meanwhile poor Nancy was trying to compose

herself sufficiently to go on reading Hugh Gifford's miserable words. She raised again the note-sheet she had been reading in the garden ; she re-read the sentence she had left unfinished there.

“To tell my miserable story rightly, I must go back to the days when I was quite a young man ; to the days when I met abroad a girl, beautiful with the beauty of her race. She was half-English, half-Spanish, for her father had married an Andalusian woman, and I loved this girl, and in my boyish folly I promised to marry her. Nancy, I did not keep this promise ; she was totally uneducated—but a peasant girl in fact—and I grew weary of a companion with whom I had nothing in common. And so time went on, and three years passed away, and then Alice told me she was about to become a mother, and entreated me for the child's sake to fulfil at last the promise I had made to her. To my shame I refused, and she then began to threaten me, and finally followed me to Wrothsley, and sent for me there to meet her in the park. We had a stormy interview ; she declaring she would go and tell my mother, and I retorting that it would be useless. Suddenly she produced a small revolver and said she would shoot me, unless I fulfilled my old promise to make her my wife. I thought she was only trying to frighten me, and I laughed, but the next moment she actually shot me, and as I became almost immediately unconscious, she, believing she had killed me, turned and fled from the spot.

“Do you understand now, Nancy ? This most unhappy, most unfortunate woman having wounded me severely as you know, went back to town in a state of semi-madness I afterwards learnt, and then tried to commit suicide by shooting herself also. She barely escaped with her life, and the doctor who attended her wrote to me to tell me of this during my illness, and naturally I was terribly shocked.

“And now I am coming to that part of my life, when I met you, Nancy—met you and loved you very dearly. You will think these are very strange words for me now to write to you, but they are nevertheless very true ones. Yes, Nancy, in spite of all I have done I loved you, and left you only because this separation was actually forced on me.

“I need not repeat here the miserable events that

followed our marriage—my mother's utterly unjustifiable action seemed to change my whole nature and filled my heart with intense bitterness and hatred for the man who had supplanted me ; who had taken the name I had borne all my life, and who actually, as you know, personally assaulted me. Unhappily for me, unhappily for her, just at the very time when the most burning indignation against this man filled my heart I met again by accident the woman who had shot me, and then herself, and who had always loved me too well. You, with your gentle nature, had tried to soften my feelings to this man ; had praised him, and seemed to like him, and this angered me exceedingly. But Alice Ferrars entered eagerly and passionately into my wrongs. She spoke to me of vengeance ; told me that in her land the Spaniard kills the man who had wronged him ; and she hinted darkly that my enemy might die. Nancy, these words came back and back to me—this hated brother might die—and then all would be again as it had been before my mother had told the story which had so entirely changed my life.

“ I heard stories of this man, too ; of his low life and degraded habits, and how he was dragging the name I had borne all my life to the dust ; and the longing for his death grew stronger and stronger within me. You ceased to speak of him, but I secretly resented your apparent indifference to my feelings on the subject, and listened with greedy ears to the other woman's passionate and sympathizing words.

“ But why write any longer of my temptations and my hatred ? You know they were both strange enough, and at last they brought their evil and terrible fruit. Alice Ferrars, in an accursed moment, suggested, and I listened, that this man should be lured to his death, that she should be the temptress ; and to aid her two of her Spanish relations—a man and a woman—were bribed to come to England, and a house was taken down the river, and Alice made the acquaintance of the man I hated, calling herself by another name. She was handsome, and the man fell an easy victim. We planned it all—as I write these words I know I was mad then, devil-possession, accursed ! Yes, it was so, but the mad and hideous deed was done. The poor fool was flattered by soft words, and wiled by the smiles, and walked straight into the snare we had laid for him. We fixed the day of his murder, and Juan, the

Spaniard, dug his grave beforehand. You remember the night, Nancy—the black and bitter night, when I came back to the house where my innocent wife and child were sleeping, with murder on my soul? So God help me, that night was the first time that any remorse had ever crossed my mind! Before, I had only felt hatred, and an eager and burning desire for his death. But that night I was dining with some men at the club, and suddenly the horror of the whole thing—the guilty knowledge of what was about to take place, rose before me so grimly, so terribly that I could not bear it. I rose, and left the table, telling the others I felt ill, and having partly disguised myself I started in the train for Maidenhead, hoping that I should be in time to stay their hands.

“A storm was raging when I arrived there, but I ran as fast as I could go along the slippery tow-path by the river edge. At last I reached the little villa—my God! even now I can scarcely write of that frightful hour—I stole into the house, and I met the Spanish woman, who significantly pointed to the door of one of the rooms.

“‘Tell her I want her,’ I whispered hoarsely, and the Spanish woman nodded, and went into the room she had indicated, and a moment or two later Alice Ferrars came out of it, and as I looked in her face I saw I was too late.

“I caught her hand—‘Alice, don’t do it!’ I hissed into her ear, and this was her reply:

“‘Hush, what folly,’ she said, ‘your brother is about to die;’ and her expression was terrible as she spoke.

“She had left the room door ajar, and one moment I glanced in. The wretched man was lying on a couch struggling in his death agony—but I cannot describe it, nor the scene that followed. She had poisoned him in his wine, as he lay half-asleep, and a moment or two later it was all over, they told me, and they began to talk of carrying him to his ready grave.

“I have only an indistinct recollection of what immediately followed, for I began drinking glass after glass of raw brandy, seeking to satisfy my own terrible thoughts. I heard them, I thought, carrying something heavy past the room door where I was, and I remember calling out to them for God’s sake not to bury him until they were sure he was dead. And then presently Juan came in bearing on his arm two coats rolled up together, and fastened securely by a leather strap. He too had seemingly been

drinking, for he half-insolently told me that I must consent to have this bundle of coats fastened on my back, so as to represent the hump of the dead man ! I refused at first, but he persisted. He was running the risk of his neck to please me, he said with his odious grin, and I must help him a little bit since fortune sent me on the spot. The dead man was well known at the railway station and if he was seen to leave by the late train for town, no one would look for him at Maidenhead, and thus there would be no risk of discovery at all. He almost forced me to consent, and fastened on this hideous burden, and then flung a rough cape cloak over my shoulders, declaring that now no one could tell any difference between myself and the dead man. Thus the station-master was deceived, and the dark secret hidden for a time, only, as you know, to be discovered later.

“Nancy, from that dreadful night, my life has been a hell. What do you think was the reward Alice Ferrars had bargained for ; the price that I had to pay for this black deed ? If she killed this man, I had to forsake you—you, my boy, and our home ! I paid this price as you also know ; I left the gentle woman who had tried to soften my evil passions, and I went to the one who had fanned them ; went with loathing and disgust in my heart. From the very hour, indeed, when I had looked on Alice Ferrars’ face, when the miserable man lay dying. a sudden change, an absolute revulsion took place in my feelings towards her. She was handsome, but her beauty gave me no pleasure ; she loved me, but I shuddered at her touch. Yet I was bound to her ; bound by a tie I dare not break, and great as was my sin, my punishment was still greater.

“I took a house for her, in one of the suburbs here, and the life we led there was literally, as I told you before, a hell upon earth. For soon fear came to add its terrors. The dead man’s body was found : a warrant for the apprehension of Madame de Costa, the name that Alice was known by at the riverside villa, was issued, and she lived in perpetual dread of recognition. She scarcely ever left the house, she changed the color of her hair, but she was always in terror. Her Spanish relations, too—the wretch Juan and his sister—were forever writing for money, and threatening unless vast sums were sent to them. The constant strain and misery finally broke down my health,

and for more than a year I have been drifting to the grave. I caught a severe cold, and it settled on my lungs, and the haunting remorse and wretchedness of my life, has done the rest. And Alice Ferrars' sudden and painful death, six months ago, was also terrible to witness. She died of diphtheria; died unwillingly and terror-stricken, and I felt as I stood by her, that I—and I only, had wrecked her life.

“Nancy, I have now nothing more to tell; this miserable confession of sin and bitter remorse is ended, and I have but to ask your pardon for the misery I have brought upon you, and to make one last request. Will you come to see me once more, and bring the boy? If you will, you will brighten the last hours of a most unhappy man.

“HUGH GIFFORD.”

Nancy read this long letter; read the terrible despairing words with blanched face and quivering lips, and as she drew near the conclusion, heavy tears rolled down her cheeks, and blotted the dreary lines.

“Poor, poor Hugh,” she murmured, and her thoughts travelled back to the days of their young love; to the days when she had first looked on the bright, handsome face, and listened smilingly to the winning tongue. It was all over now; that love was dead and cold in Nancy's heart, for Hugh Gifford had killed it; but her woman's pity was there still, and she made up her mind to grant his last request.

CHAPTER XLIX.

MISS GIFFORD'S WILL.

SHE went downstairs about an hour later, and quietly entered the room where Miss Gifford was sitting knitting. in a very bad humor, and Colonel Erne reading the newspapers also with a moody brow. He looked up as Nancy walked in, and saw her face was pale, but composed, but the old lady did not deign to take any notice of her entrance.

“Miss Gifford,” said Nancy addressing her, “I am

going to leave here to-day—I am going to take the boy to see his—dying father.”

“You are going to do nothing of the kind,” answered Miss Gifford sharply; “little Tommy shall leave here on no such errand—dying! I don’t believe he’s dying!”

“It’s his last request, and I cannot refuse it,” said Nancy, quietly but firmly.

“Have you no pride left in you?” cried Miss Gifford, throwing her knitting on the floor in her excitement. “Going to see a man who has disgraced us all; who is living with another woman—”

“She is dead,” interrupted Nancy.

“She may be dead, or she may not be dead for anything I care,” continued the irate old lady, “but I won’t have little Tommy contaminated by going near such people.”

“Dear Miss Gifford,” said Nancy gently, and she took Miss Gifford’s withered and unwilling hand, “I would not, you know, willingly act against any wish of yours, but—if—if you think of him, lonely, dying, pining to look on his boy’s face, I am sure you would not wish me to refuse to take the child? I must take him—I have no choice.”

“Then I’ll have nothing more to say to any of you—I’ll alter my will.”

Nancy did not speak, but she cast down her eyes.

“Won’t that stop you?” inquired Miss Gifford grimly.

“No, Miss Gifford,” again answered Nancy, looking up, “I must go.”

Upon this Colonel Erne laid down his newspaper, and approached the two ladies.

“If Mr. Gifford is so ill, Miss Gifford,” he said, “it is but natural he should wish to see his child.”

“He chose to forsake his child, and his wife too,” retorted the ancient lady.

“But the approach of death makes a great difference,” answered Erne. “And it is like—Nancy to go.”

He had never called her Nancy in Miss Gifford’s presence before, and she instantly remarked it.

“I call her a fool for her pains,” she said very crossly.

“When do you wish to go?” he continued now addressing Nancy.

“To day,” she answered, “he—poor fellow says he may not live many days.”

"If you will allow me, I will escort you there," then went on Erne; "it would be too much for you to go alone with the child."

"Thank you, Godfrey," answered Nancy gratefully, and simply; "it will be a great comfort to me to have you with me."

"Hum!" grunted Miss Gifford indignantly, and then she turned her back and hobbled out of the room.

After she had gone Nancy and Erne soon arranged all the details of their journey, and an hour later they had left the Manor House, taking with them Master Tommy and his nurse. They travelled as quickly as they could, and said very little to each other on the way; the boy carrying on the principal part of the conversation. Miss Gifford had condescended to bid them good-bye, and had kissed Tommy, but not Nancy, to mark her disapproval of her conduct.

"Bring the boy back at any rate," she said to Erne as a parting salutation.

"I shall bring them both back," answered Erne gravely.

"I'm not so sure of that," retorted Miss Gifford, and these words did not add to Erne's happiness during the journey.

Nancy noticed how much more restless he was than usual, and how his lips twitched. But he said nothing on the subject of his own feelings, but was grave and kindly, as usual, and did everything he could for the comfort of Nancy and the boy.

Then when they arrived at Paris, they drove direct to an hotel, where they left Master Tommy and his nurse, and then proceeded at once to the address that Hugh Gifford had given Nancy in his letter. Erne here descended from the carriage, and left Nancy pale and trembling. A moment or two later the door of the house was opened, and Erne held a short conversation in too low a tone for Nancy to hear, whose heart was now beating almost audibly.

Presently Erne went back to the carriage, and Nancy noticed that his face was very white.

"Let me get in beside you for a moment or two, Nancy," he said, and in another instant he was at her side.

"I have something to tell you, Nancy," he went on, and he took her hand.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly.

"It is something very sad."

"Not—" said Nancy, with a sort of a gasp.

"Yes," answered Erne gently to the unspoken question; "Mr. Gifford died suddenly this morning—he went out for a short walk, and broke a blood-vessel in the streets."

"Oh! Godfrey!" cried Nancy, and she put her hand over her face, and tears rushed into her eyes.

"I will tell the driver to take a turn or two," said Erne, "the shock must be very great to you."

Nancy did not speak; she leaned back in the carriage, and thought of the brief life that had just closed. She thought too, of the dark tragedy that was now ended, and of the mother and two sons, whose fates had been so dear.

"I saw his servant," continued Erne, speaking still in that kind, considerate voice, "and he told me he did not suffer much, but that he had been getting gradually weaker for more than a year—poor fellow, he is quite young is he not?"

"Yes," answered Nancy, with a sob.

"It is a pity he did not live to see his child."

"Yes," again said poor Nancy, but in her heart she knew it was better for his child, that he was gone. There was no danger now, and the shadow of his father's hidden sin could never fall on the boy's innocent head.

"I should like to see him," presently said Nancy, raising herself up.

"I thought you would like to see him," replied Erne, "so I told the driver to keep in the neighborhood."

So they returned to the house where Hugh Gifford had died, in his young manhood, and Nancy stood still and silent, looking at the face now so calm and beautiful. Erne went into the death-chamber with her, but in a little while Nancy asked to be left alone, and as the door closed after Erne, she fell down on her knees by the side of the dead man.

"Oh! God be merciful to him," she prayed; "he suffered so much—Oh! poor, poor Hugh!"

Long she knelt there, praying for him in her simple, heartfelt words. She had forgiven him all his wrongs against her, and only remembered his temptations, and his bitter remorse. And she thought too of the days when he had loved her, and of their brief happiness in the very

city where he had passed away, miserable and alone.

"I will bring your boy to see you, Hugh," she whispered softly, before she left him, and she bent down and kissed the cold brow of the handsome, familiar face.

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She took the child to see him the next day, and the little fellow, with no small awe, laid a beautiful wreath on his dead father's breast, and these flowers were afterwards placed with him in his grave. It pleased Nancy to do everything as though Hugh Gifford had never sinned against her, and Erne silently watching her began to wonder if her love had survived his absence and neglect. But it was not so; and when Erne asked her if she wished to convey his body to Wrothsley, she answered with sudden agitation.

"No, no, certainly not—let him sleep here."

Not among his kindred in the family vault of the chapel attached to the great mansion his grandfather had built; not by the mother whose heart he had broken, nor by the brother whose life he had destroyed. Let him sleep far away from them—among strangers—and Nancy shuddered, and thought the dead brothers would not rest in peace if laid side by side.

So they buried him in the city, where he died, and his wife and child followed him to his grave, and laid flowers there, and paid him all outward semblance of respect and affection. No one but Nancy knew the dark secret that was buried with him; though one of those who stood round his grave suspected it, for somehow Erne had always, in his own mind, connected Hugh Gifford with his brother's tragic death.

He had left a will, and Nancy suddenly found herself a rich woman. He had bequeathed five thousand a year to her for life, and the control of the whole of his large income until his son became of age. His mother's death had brought a great accession to his fortune, and he had died a wealthy, though a most miserable, man.

Nancy and her boy remained about a week in Paris after he was buried, and then the young widow and her son returned to England, and Nancy went, by Miss Gifford's especial request, straight back to Gateford, only stopping a few hours in town to see her mother.

Miss Gifford, indeed, felt not a little ashamed of herself

when she heard of Hugh Gifford's sudden and melancholy death. To do her justice she had not believed he was dying at all; and that he should die when his wife and child were actually on their way to bid him good-bye, affected the old lady very strangely.

"But it's a good thing," at last she decided; and yet she received Nancy with an unwonted moisture in her eyes, and made no allusion at all to the melancholy cause of her hurried journey, nor her own bad temper about it.

Master Tommy had brought her as a present from Paris a wonderfully beautiful white embroidered shawl, and the old lady accepted the peace-offering very graciously. She also received Erne very graciously.

"Thank you for bringing them both safely back," she said.

"I know what good care you take of them both," answered Erne smiling pleasantly, and then changed the conversation which he thought might be painful to Nancy.

Nevertheless September waned into October, and October crept on apace, and the russet leaves began to fall in showers from the tall elms at Gateford, and still Miss Gifford heard nothing of the marriage on which her heart was set.

"What on earth is he waiting for now," she many a time thought impatiently, looking from Erne's handsome face to Nancy's sweet one.

"I must give him a hint," at last she decided, and we shall see how she actually did this, and how one day towards the end of October, in her quaint way she let Erne know what she wished.

It was in the afternoon—a bright, breezy afternoon—and Miss Gifford had grown absolutely weary of watching a slender, black-robed figure, and Erne's soldier-like one, pacing up and down the moss-grown walks at Gateford.

"It's the same thing every day," thought the old lady, eyeing them from the windows, "and yet nothing comes of it."

Yet at the very moment she was thinking this, Erne was telling Nancy the old, old story, and she was listening with blushing cheeks and a happy heart.

"It is too soon," she said softly.

"But I have waited a long time, Nancy," pleaded Erne,

“and I should not have found courage to speak now, only I think we should be happy.”

“Yes,” whispered Nancy, yet more softly.

“Then you will be my wife, dear?”

“Yes,” again said Nancy, but at this moment Miss Gifford’s ancient butler appeared on the scene, and informed them that Miss Gifford wished to speak to them.

They went into the house together, with the sweet knowledge of their mutual love gladdening their hearts, and found the old lady sitting in state in the dining-room, with her gold spectacles on her nose, and a roll of legal looking papers spread out before her.

“I want to read to you my will, young people,” she said, addressing them, “will you both please to sit down.

Whereupon she took up the papers before her, and began to read aloud her last will and testament, in which she bequeathed in legal terms the whole of her large fortune—with the exception of one legacy—to Thomas Gifford, son of her great nephew Hugh Gifford, and her godson, named after his great-great-grandfather, Thomas her brother; the joint guardians of this great sum being Colonel Godfrey Erne and Nancy Gifford his mother. And she further bequeathed to the said Colonel Godfrey Erne, the sum of twenty thousand pounds, from a feeling of personal regard of his character, and also because of his resemblance to a friend long dead; a condition however being attached to this legacy, which was, that he should marry the said Nancy Gifford within six months after her widowhood.

“There, sir!” she said, rising and touching Erne’s shoulder with her bony hand as she passed; “if you can’t take a hint, I don’t think much of you!”

“My dear Miss Gifford, I didn’t want one!” said Erne rising with a laugh, and taking her hand, “Nancy has already promised to be my wife.”

“Well I declare!” retorted the old lady, “the slyness of some people—but all the same I thought you were so long about it, I’d just give you a hint.”

There is now little more to tell; Nancy married Godfrey Erne within the given time, and the bitter sorrows of her life seem to trouble her no more. They have no secrets, these two, and Nancy knows she can safely trust the brave and faithful heart that her sweet girlish face won long ago. They live near Gateford, but not with Miss Gifford, and that ancient lady frequently boasted she had made the match.

But Miss Gifford has one great annoyance, which is the daily improving health of little Lord Gilmore.

“I declare I believe he is going to live after all,” she said one day to Nancy ; “but still Tommy will be a rich man.”

THE END.

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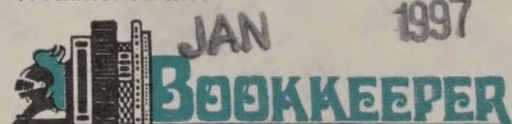
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